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*An Examination of the Lifelong Relationships of Control Resulting in and from Forced Marriages within British South Asian Communities in the UK*

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# An Examination of the Lifelong Relationships of Control Resulting in and from Forced Marriages within British South Asian Communities in the UK

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**PhD Thesis**

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# Abstract

This research advances the processual understanding of forced marriage (Chantler and McCarry, 2020) as experienced by British South Asian women by demonstrating the varying degrees of coercion and control women experience before, during and after forced marriage. A qualitative research approach used feminist epistemology to explore gendered control at the intersection of family, kinship relationships, intergenerational power, 'honour', shame, age, race, religion, citizenship, marriage, culture and community. The study involved biographical narrative interviews with female victim-survivors of forced marriage (n=6); semi-structured interviews with practitioners (n=7) and wider members of the British South Asian community (n=6).

A thematic analysis determined key themes. Firstly, the 'before' stage highlights the gendered socialisation into 'honour', shame, conformity and control in women's formative years, culminating in their capitulation to parents' wishes about marriage. Secondly, the 'during' stage is characterised by a 'web of control' operating through multiple perpetrators (natal family, husband, marital family, the wider community) at multiple levels, cumulatively preventing women from leaving the marriage. Lastly, the 'after' stage is rife with punishment for choosing to leave—disownment by parents; continued invalidation of women's experiences by ex-husbands, natal family and community. Victim-survivors in the study report inconsistent responses from schools, social workers and health services. Interviews with practitioners highlight their strive to attain a nuanced understanding of forced marriage to aid thorough risk assessment; tease out the distinction between arranged and forced marriage; and address the nervousness accompanying this culturally and racially sensitive topic. This research addresses a lag in the overall conceptualisation of forced marriage by positing that the control experienced by racially minoritised victims-survivors of forced marriage is of an ongoing and lifelong nature, substantiating the process-based understanding of this form of violence against women. This research makes an original contribution by expanding Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control to encompass the complex family structures and multiple perpetrators that shape British South Asian women's cumulative experiences of control before, during and after forced marriage.

# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

# Acknowledgements

"This is the first time I am speaking about it". These were the words of a participant that played in my mind multiple times, reminding me that I am doing something very important. People tell you that your research is important, but it's only when you hear it from your participants, you believe in the significance of your work. My thanks go out to the very lively and lovely participants I spoke to, I know it was not easy, but I am glad you all trusted me with this. Without your support, this work would not have been possible.

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# Dedication

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Research Background and Context

Marriage is regarded as the ultimate union between two individuals, symbolising lifelong commitment (Chantler, 2014). It represents a definitive moment of permanence, often characterised as a "this is it" or "they are the one" decision in one's life. However, this ideal is starkly contrasted by the reality of forced marriages, where one or both individuals enter the union without free or full consent. "Marriages shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16 (2)). A threat or an actual occurrence of forced marriage constitutes lack of free, full, meaningful and informed consent (or no consent in the case of people with learning disabilities) where one or both spouses experience limited or no degree of choice in terms of whether to marry, whom to marry, when to marry, or even express their unwillingness to marry without fearing negative consequences (Anitha and Gill, 2009; Clawson and Fyson, 2017; Esthappan et al., 2018). Forced marriage, a form of gender-based violence, has garnered significant attention from media and policymakers in the UK and globally (Hague and Thiara, 2009; Anitha and Gill, 2015). This issue, which also includes early and child marriage (as minors cannot give informed consent), is internationally recognised as a human rights violation (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1; Council of Europe, 2011).

The focus of critique has been on the contentious nature of 'force' indicating that coercion, pressure or abuse can range from subtle and implicit manifestations like psychological abuse, emotional pressure, financial dependency, isolation, incarceration (Khanum, 2008; Anitha and Gill, 2009; Samad, 2010; Gill and Gould, 2019) to more drastic forms including deceit, abduction, physical and sexual violence (Brandon and Hafez, 2008; Sanghera, 2009; Idriss, 2017; Gill, Cox and Weir, 2018). Understanding the distinction between forced and arranged marriages is crucial, as arranged marriages are common practices, particularly in racially minoritised communities, where family members help find a marriage partner, but the marriage occurs with the full consent of both individuals (Pande, 2014; Dutt, 2022). In principle, arranged marriages are acceptable as long as both parties agree or do not fear the consequences of saying no to a match proposed by their family. However, Anitha and Gill (2009; 2011) highlight that consent and coercion exist on a continuum, with complex and subtle forms of coercion, such as family obligation, threats and parental pressure, often pre-empting or rendering consent meaningless. These nuances create situations that cannot be neatly categorised

as either consent or coercion, resulting in a 'slippage' between arranged and forced marriage (Gangoli et al., 2011).

Forced marriage is a multifaceted issue predominantly impacting young individuals, particularly women, severely limiting their agency, choice, and individual freedom. The UK-wide Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) consistently identifies Pakistan, Bangladesh and India as primary 'focus countries' associated with forced marriage risks (Samad and Eades, 2002; Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO], 2018; 2023). These focus countries are identified based on where the forced marriage is planned, has occurred, or where the spouse currently resides. Established in 2005, the FMU is a joint initiative of the Home Office and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office to prevent forced marriages involving UK citizens domestically and internationally. The FMU engages in outreach, education, and individual case interventions, collaborating with various agencies to protect victims-survivors. It helps secure safe accommodation, halt visas for sponsors, and apply for Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs). The FMU also compiles annual statistics on reported forced marriage cases through its helpline (Home Office and FCO, 2018).

Although African and Middle Eastern countries are also included in the category of 'focus countries', this research specifically examines the experiences of forced marriage among British South Asian women from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian backgrounds. Academics caution against 'othering' of racially minoritised communities as it can lead to 'race anxiety' (Chantler et al., 2001; 2017) significantly affecting interventionist responses. An essentialist cultural discourse not only obscures the socio-political complexities surrounding forced marriages but also overlooks the broader context of violence against women (Gill, 2006; Gill and Anitha, 2009: 259; Gill and Brah, 2013; Eshareturi, Lyle, and Morgan, 2014). Furthermore, forced marriage has been prevalent in various orthodox religious communities and in "shotgun" marriages within Western contexts (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011). While rejecting essentialist views of violence against racially minoritised women is crucial, it is equally important to recognise and document the specific, intersectional contexts of their lived experiences. This approach enables the development of more effective support services.

Recent statistics from the FMU indicate that it supported 302 cases of forced marriage, with 78% involving female victims and 22% male victims (Home Office and FCO, 2023). Notwithstanding novel research on male victims of forced marriage (see Samad, 2010; Jaspal, 2014; Dutt, 2020), this thesis underscores women's experiences of forced marriage. I acknowledge emerging research on forced marriage involving people with learning disabilities, linked to securing long-term care (Clawson and Fyson, 2017), but a full exploration of this topic was beyond the scope of this thesis. The extent of

forced marriage is difficult to assess, with actual cases likely exceeding FMU statistics due to underreporting and lack of access to support, classifying forced marriage as a 'hidden' crime (Hester et al., 2007; Home Office and FCO, 2018). Choice, coercion, and consent are central to the discussions surrounding women's entry into forced marriages in social, policy, and legal contexts (Stark, 2007; Enright, 2009; Wilson, 2007; Anitha and Gill, 2009). Criminalisation of forced marriage has been a subject of extensive debate (Idriss, 2015; Gill, 2011; Pearce and Gill, 2012). Under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, forced marriage is a criminal offense, yet as of early 2019, there have been only four convictions in the UK. Additionally, section 63B (1) of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 provides for FMPOs as a civil remedy, predating the 2014 Act and offers an alternative to criminal prosecution. Notwithstanding the legal debate around the criminalisation of forced marriage in the UK, legislative responses to forced marriage is not the focus of this thesis.

Controlling and coercive behaviours are frequently employed to force women and girls into marriage, leading to numerous other severe harms such as domestic abuse, rape, forced pregnancy and forced servitude (Hester et al., 2007; Gill and Gould, 2019; Chantler and McCarry, 2020; Gangoli and Hester, 2023). The need to definitively agree to marriages arranged by family can be especially felt by women, who are sensitised about the significance of family 'honour', inevitability of marriage, and are made to internalise limited freedom in the decision-making process (Abu Amara, Guiné, and Hamel, 2013; Gill, 2014), all from a young age. The notion of consent cannot be divorced from pressures to fulfil expected gender roles, proving that consent is 'embedded within power relations' (Chantler, 2012: 177). Forced marriage is often employed as a means of controlling women's burgeoning sexuality, especially when they form relationships with men not sanctioned by their families or engage in pre-marital sex (Hossain, 2011; Mayeda et al., 2019). It can also stem from long-standing familial obligations regarding marriage promises made during birth/childhood (Chantler et al., 2009).

Attempting to refuse or escape a forced marriage often puts victims-survivors at risk of 'honour' killings and other forms of 'honour'-based abuse (HBA henceforth) (Gill, 2014; Gill and Walker, 2020). HBA primarily targets individuals who are seen as violating community or family norms, values, and gendered construct of 'honour' (*izzat*, as termed in South Asian cultures, more detail in Chapter 2), thereby bringing shame to their families. Primarily directed at women, HBA is also associated with perceived transgressions such as engaging in pre-marital relationships, dating outside one's faith or religion, dressing in ways considered inappropriate, or adopting behaviors deemed too 'Westernised' (Dutt et al., 2024, forthcoming). 'Honour' code is so strong that key agencies involved in safeguarding victim-survivors opine that 'forced marriages rarely occur without HBA' (Dyer, 2015: 27).

## 1.2 What This Research Does and Why It Is Important

The following sections outline the research aims and objectives. It also outlines why this research is important and the specific contribution it makes. It sets out the research questions that will be addressed within this thesis.

### 1.2.1 Research Aim and Objectives

Despite existing literature on forced marriage, there is a lack of in-depth, process-based analysis that captures the continuous and multifaceted control experienced by British South Asian women in relation to forced marriage. The range and prevalence of violence, abuse and control British South Asian women face in their daily lives in the broader context of forced marriage has been an underexplored consideration and is the main focus of this research. There is a need to highlight the ongoing pressures and coercive elements women experience not only before but also during and after a forced marriage. Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control is heavily based on adult intimate partner relationships, ignoring the complex familial dynamics racially minoritised women are confronted with before, during and after a forced marriage. The specificity of these women's experiences implicates multiple perpetrators; multiple relationships within complex family structures shaped by 'honour', shame, culture, age, faith; a nuanced understanding of kinship relationships; and gendered dynamics of households (Mirza, 2017). Below are the aims of this research:

- To demonstrate the multidirectional and varying degrees of coercion and control British South Asian women encounter before, during and after a forced marriage.
- To elevate the process-based understanding of forced marriage, as foregrounded by Chantler and McCarry (2020)
- To understand how power is framed specifically in relation to British South Asian women's experiences of lifelong control, given the multiple relationships and complex family structures that characterise their lives.

### 1.2.2 Research Contribution and Significance

This research provides a processual understanding of what happens before, during and after a forced marriage and spotlights substantial elements of control throughout these individual stages. This research considers the impact of childhood neglect and abuse, and victim-survivors' positions within the social relations of power based on their gender, marital status, citizenship, sexuality and race. This comprehensive approach is crucial for understanding the 'total coercive burden' (Anitha and Gill, 2011: 55) that undermines consent to marriage and exacerbates women's experiences of abuse within and after forced marriage. By illuminating the continuous nature of control throughout the entire process of being forced into a marriage and enduring it, this research addresses a significant gap in literature and presents an original finding on the lifelong gendered control experienced by British South Asian women.

This research is important as it is the first to examine the diverse experiences of British South Asian women before, during, and after forced marriage. It marks a significant scholarly advancement, highlighting the pervasive and lifelong nature of control throughout the lived experience of forced marriage within the British South Asian community. It advocates for a deeper, process-oriented understanding to inform more effective interventions and support mechanisms.

Aside from victim-survivors, this research also engages with the views and perceptions of the wider British South Asian community regarding consent in marriages, how marriages should be done, and the issue of forced marriage. This research also assesses the effectiveness and challenges faced by practitioners (police, social workers and specialist organisations, see 1.4.3) in addressing forced marriage, emphasising the need to integrate the process-based understanding of this issue. By providing a nuanced analysis, this research is vital for informing policy, enhancing practitioner training, and ultimately ensuring better protection and support for individuals experiencing or at-risk of forced marriage. This approach not only amplifies the voices of those directly affected but also provides critical insights for practitioners and policymakers dedicated to combating forced marriage.

### 1.2.3 Research Questions

Below are the research questions for this project examining the lifelong nature of control within the complexity of women's experiences of forced marriage:

1.) What factors contribute to the coercive processes leading to forced marriages among British South Asian women, and how do these factors shape their pre-marital experiences?

2.) What is the nature of control experienced by women when they are in the forced marriage?

3.) How do women leave forced marriages, and how do they continue to experience control and coercion after leaving?

4.) How do practitioners perceive and address the issue of forced marriage, and what gaps/opportunities exist in their approaches to supporting victim-survivors?

## 1.3 Definitions and Concepts

While Chapter 2 will discuss the key concepts across the topics of forced marriage, HBA and coercive control, this section clarifies the use of some terminologies in relation to these broader concepts and provides a foundational understanding of some of the key terms routinely used in the thesis. It highlights the rationale behind the use of some specific terms, and how I have contextualised them for my research.

### 1.3.1 'Honour' and Shame

In the main, 'honour' is associated with notions of esteem, prestige and dignity (Kaur, 2018). Anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers (1966: 22) noted that:

> 'honour' is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognised by society, his *right* to pride. [original emphasis]

Therefore, 'honour' is not just about how an individual sees themselves, but also how they are perceived by others in the society. To this effect, Spierenburg (1988:2) highlights that "a person's own feeling of self-worth, assessment of their worth in the eyes of others, and the actual opinion of others about them" is also constitutive of 'honour'. Institutionalised, community and family understandings of 'honour', thus, involve a wide range of ascribed actions and behaviours which directly affect respectability, reputation, worthiness, moral character, integrity, prestige, social standing and self-evaluation of individuals, families and communities (Vandello and Cohen, 2004). The family is the key site of 'honour', and therefore its ethos, value systems and conduct (carried out in private *and* public)

significantly determine how a family is perceived by others, not only denoting the strong social and personal value attached to 'honour', but also how it operates as a link between the individual and the community. As a variation of the term, in South Asian communities, 'honour' is also referred to as *izzat* (Welchman and Hossain, 2005: 8). The twin concept of shame is useful in a preliminary understanding that whatever is not honourable is shameful. '*Sharam'* translates to shame, shyness and modesty, and is closely interrelated with 'honour'. The relationship is as such that when 'honour' is related to expected female behaviours, shame is related to transgressing from these expected behaviours (Gill, 2014a). Mandelbaum's (1988: 23) words elucidate this relationship as: "'honour' has to be continually reaffirmed in practice, reinforced in action, defended against challenge and re-won and advanced in competition". Additionally, 'honour'-based societies are not only driven by the wish to maintain respect and 'honour', but also to avoid any actions which will bring dishonour (Wikan, 2008). Within this system women have no 'honour' of their own, chiefly because they are not considered to be individual persons, thus their reputations are reflected only through their families, either increasing or damaging the family 'honour' (Melto, 2012). Non-conformity by women can lead to an ideological campaign to rectify perceived to be sullied 'honour'. The terms 'honour' (or *izzat*) and shame (or *sharam*) were recurringly used by participants and is representative of their experience and views. 'Honour' has been apostrophised to denote its problematic connotations in the context of female behaviour and sexuality, and control of it.

## 1.3.2 'Victim' or 'Survivor'?

There is significant debate regarding the terms 'survivor' and 'victim', which carry different implications (Anderson and Gold, 1994). The term 'victim' was traditionally used but criticised for implying victim-blaming and helplessness (Walker, 1984). It suggests powerlessness and a lack of agency, failing to honour the strength and resilience of those who leave abusive relationships. Kelly and Radford (1990) noted that feminists replaced 'victim' with 'survivor' to challenge victim-blaming connotations and highlight resistance and coping strategies. 'Survivor' is seen as more empowering, and signals hope and agency (Gupta, 2014) but overlooks the harsh reality that some individuals do not survive the devastating impacts of HBA and forced marriage. Additionally, the usage of these terms can also vary based on context: the police and criminal justice system refer to 'victims' of crime, while those in health and social care prefer 'survivor' (Bows, 2017: 30). Academics within the field of violence against racially minoritised women note that there exist "co-articulations between these two

characterisations" and sometimes use the terminology 'victims/survivors' (Anitha, 2023: 380). I use the term 'victim-survivors' to acknowledge both the subjugation and resilience of women. This terminology is not intended to conflate these two characterisations but rather accommodates the complexity of their experiences. Their journey encompasses being forced into a marriage, being compelled to stay in it, and experiencing blame for leaving it. By using 'victim-survivors', I capture the multifaceted nature of their experiences of control and agency within this process.

### 1.3.3 Practitioners

The term 'practitioner' encompasses a broad range of professionals and public bodies involved in addressing and responding to the issue of forced marriage (see Gill and Anitha, 2023). It refers to professionals who come in contact with victim-survivors of forced marriage and are responsible for their support and safeguarding. This includes representatives from local authorities and frontline workers across specialist organisations supporting individuals affected by different types of gendered violence and abuse. This includes police officers, National Health Service (NHS) staff, social workers, education professionals, and members of women's charities and advocacy groups. This also includes 'by and for' specialist services managed by racially minoritised women who have deep expertise and understanding of the intersectional issues compounding racially minoritised women's experiences of abuse (Anitha and Dhaliwal, 2019; Larasi, 2013). Overall, practitioners play a crucial role in identifying, supporting and protecting individuals at risk or affected by forced marriage, and implementing policies, thereby contributing to a coordinated forced marriage response.

### 1.3.4 The 'Wider Community'

Aside from the general British South Asian community members I recruited, which is distinctly referred to as the 'community sample' in this research (see Chapter 3.2.2), the thesis also uses the term 'wider community' to encompass individuals whom victim-survivors frequently encountered and 'knew of' but were not necessarily related by blood. This group includes neighbours, local shopkeepers (sometimes referred to as 'uncles' and 'aunts'), colleagues, family friends, faith leaders, and the victim-survivors' own social circle. Victim-survivors in this research often viewed the geographical area they resided in as a 'community' due to the varying levels of familiarity and interaction among its members.

### 1.3.5 'Racially Minoritised'

Words matter, and they are particularly significant when it comes to identity. Immigrants and racial minorities in the UK have often been excluded from statehood, forcing them into deep reflection on their identities (Anitha and Dhaliwal, 2019). I consciously avoid using the term 'BAME' (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) to refer to the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the participants. The terminology presumes unity and sameness among different black and minority women's groups that does not necessarily exist (Gupta, 2003). Furthermore, ideological differences persist between black and minority women's groups. For example, while white feminists often critique the concept of the 'family,' black feminists view the family as a site of resistance against racism (Gupta, 2003: 14-15). In contrast, South Asian feminists argue that focusing solely on nuclear families overlooks the extended family structures common in South Asian communities, which can be sites of gendered and sexual oppression for women (Gangoli et al., 2011).

Gupta (2003: 15) further notes how 'BAME' might invoke feelings of being 'unfairly grouped with Indians, Pakistanis, Sikhs, Kashmiris and Sri Lankans' when there are distinct differences and nuances within each of these groups. Therefore, such internal diversity makes the term 'BAME' too homogenising for this research. I instead use the term 'racially minoritised' to acknowledge the marginalisation and discrimination faced by these groups, rather than suggesting an inherent or static identity. I concentrate on a particular subsection within racially minoritised communities, namely South Asian women to ground the specificities in the diverse and multidimensional experiences of control faced by this cohort of women. By using 'racially minoritised' and distinctly referring to South Asian women, this research respects the complex realities of women in these groups, rather than reducing all facets of their identity and lived experience to a single category.

## 1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis falls into eight chapters.

**Chapter 2: Literature review**

This chapter reviews relevant literature on the topic of forced marriage, HBA, coercive control and intersectionality. It also provides contextualisation of how 'honour' and shame operate in South Asian cultures, where marriage holds a prime position in family and individual lives. There is a discussion of how choice and coercion are implicated in relation to forced marriage, followed by investigating the 'grey' area between arranged and forced marriage. It also delves into interventionist responses to the problem of forced marriage, and the impact this has had on those facing forced marriage.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter details the qualitative research design and feminist epistemology underpinning the study. It covers the research sample, sampling criteria, recruitment challenges, and fieldwork procedures, including interviewing, transcribing, and thematic analysis. It also discusses ethical considerations, reflects on the researcher's positionality, and outlines the organisation of results.

## Findings and Discussion Chapters

**Chapter 4: Before the forced marriage**

Forced marriage is not a sudden event; its foundations are laid early in life through young girls' conditioning into control, conformity to family narrative, with stereotypical constructions of femininity promoting subservience and obedience. This chapter reveals that forced marriage often happens in the context of childhood abuse and neglect, with girls conditioned into subservience and obedience through the 'good daughter' trope. This conditioning limits their choice and intensifies pressures to marry.

**Chapter 5: During the forced marriage**

This chapter examines multidirectional control faced by women in forced marriages from parents, husbands, and the broader community. It highlights how parents contribute to a 'web of control' by pressuring daughters to stay and legitimising abuse by the husband. Husbands maintain control through isolation, financial exploitation, and sexual violence among other coercive strategies. The wider community reinforces control by dismissing women's experiences and blaming them for even considering leaving. The chapter also contextualises how women's British citizenship is exploited, creating additional vulnerabilities.

**Chapter 6: Planning to leave and after leaving the forced marriage**

This chapter identifies key factors influencing decisions to leave the forced marriage such as fear of disownment, community stigma, and lack of support from natal families. The chapter challenges simplistic views of agency by showcasing diverse ways South Asian women navigate resistance. It also examines the ongoing control women face from natal families, ex-husbands, and the broader community after leaving. Natal families may continue to invalidate women's experiences of abuse, while ex-husbands perpetuate control by stigmatising them. The chapter highlights how divorce stigma impacts women's actions and community perceptions.

## Chapter 7: Help-seeking and responses to forced marriage

This chapter explores the inadequate responses victim-survivors received from formal services during their experience of forced marriage. It highlights failures by social services and schools in recognising risks owing to dominant racial discourses around forced marriage. Victim-survivors feel let down by these systems, which impact their needs before, during and after forced marriage. The chapter also presents findings from interviews with practitioners, emphasising their approach to understand the complex motivations behind forced marriages, differentiate them from arranged marriages, and address race anxiety in their support strategies. The chapter notes improvements in practitioner responses, advocating for a process-based approach to better support victim-survivors throughout their experiences.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

The conclusion chapter summarises how each research question was addressed, detailing the nuanced insights into the control experienced by South Asian women before, during, and after forced marriages. It highlights the original contributions of the research, including an expanded understanding of coercive control (Stark, 2007) and the lifelong nature of control faced by British South Asian women in the context of forced marriages. The chapter also discusses the study's limitations and finally, offers recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

This chapter delves into the definitions and complexities of forced marriage, offering a process-based understanding of the issue. It examines the intersection of forced marriage and HBA, focusing on abuse patterns among British South Asian women. The chapter reviews key literature on 'honour' and shame, exploring how these gendered constructs regulate women's actions and the severe consequences of violating these norms. It discusses how concerns over women's sexuality often lead to forced marriages and highlights the socialisation of South Asian women into marriage. The chapter addresses the binaries of consent and coercion, showing how women's consent is shaped by gendered power dynamics and family interests. It explores the grey area between arranged and forced marriages, emphasizing the subtle pressures that blur these lines. Additionally, it considers the various forms of violence women endure post-forced marriage and the complex family dynamics that contribute to ongoing control. The chapter critiques the cultural framing of forced marriage in the UK. It then describes the conceptualisation of this study comprising of intersectionality and coercive control to explore and interpret women's overall experience of forced marriage.

## 2.1 What is forced marriage?

Forced marriage, internationally recognised as a violation of human rights, particularly against young girls and women, is defined as a marriage in which one or both parties cannot give informed and meaningful consent due to various forms of duress, including physical, sexual, financial, emotional, and psychological coercion (FCO and Simmonds, 2013: 4-5). Academic scholarship on forced marriage generally adopts the following Home Office definition on a preliminary basis:

> A forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not (or, in the case of some adults with support needs, cannot) consent to the marriage and duress is involved. Duress can include physical, psychological, financial, sexual and emotional pressure. (Home Affairs Committee, 2008)

The UK definition resonates with international human rights instruments alike where the fundamental right to freely consent to marriages or choose a partner is robustly premised on liberty, dignity and individual determination to lead a mutually consensual life after the union of marriage; "Marriages shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16 (2)). This applies to both civil ceremonies and religious or non-state regulated ceremonies (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023: 12). Child marriages or marriages involving people with severe disabilities are also seen as forced because "age- or disability- related lack of understanding of the rights and responsibilities involved in the institution of marriage means that they cannot give free and full consent to the marriage" (ibid; Clawson and Fyson, 2017). In light of the recent increase of minimum age of marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18 years of age in England and Wales, child marriages are seen as forced even though coercion may be absent (Marriage and Civil Partnership Act, 2022; Tarr and Gupta, 2022; Gill and Gould, 2019).

It is recognised that forced marriage can be closely linked to human trafficking and modern slavery, particularly in contexts of war and peacetime (Machel, 2001; Park, 2006; International Labour Organisation,2017, 22; Quek, 2018; Kakar and Yousaf, 2021). Within this strand of literature, scholars emphasise that rape, sexual slavery and labour exploitation co-occur at the nexus of forced marriage and human trafficking (Quek, 2018; McCabe and Eglan, 2022). Defining forced marriage is also complicated by factors like poverty and cultural practices in developing countries, where early marriages are often economically driven. Marrying off a child can reduce financial strain or bring in resources through practices like bride-price[1] or dowry[2] (Gangoli and Chantler, 2009; Chantler, 2012; UNICEF, 2016). Understanding forced marriage is further complicated by its frequent conflation with consensual arranged marriages. While the FMU and Home Office differentiate between the two based on individuals' ability to choose their partner, arranged marriages can sometimes evolve into forced marriages, creating a 'grey' area. This is crucial to the specific context of this study and will be explored further in Chapter 2.6.

The core definition of forced marriage revolves around the absence of free, full and informed consent from one or both individuals. However, academic literature expands this understanding, defining forced marriage as a situation in which individuals feel they lack genuine choice regarding i.) whether

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[1] Bride-price is a tradition in which the groom's family provides a gift to the bride's family. In impoverished and subsistence-based communities, this gift can be essential for the bride's family to sustain themselves.
[2] Dowry is a cultural tradition where the bride's family provides money, goods, or property to the groom and his family as part of the marriage arrangements. This practice is often seen as a way to secure the bride's future and can play a significant role in the social and economic dynamics of marriage.

they want to marry, ii.) who they marry, or iii.) when they marry; or feel unable to express their true wishes without facing negative consequences" (Esthappan et al., 2018: 5732). A 'case' of forced marriage may involve either the threat of forced marriage or its actual occurrence (Hester et al., 2007; NatCen, 2009). Additionally, the literature has advanced from viewing forced marriage merely as an entry point to recognising the many forms of abuse that it entails. Gangoli et al. (2011: 38-39) expand on Kelly's (1988) continuum of gender-based violence to more comprehensively capture the experience of forced marriage, rather than confining it to a single theoretical category. This continuum includes various forms of violence and abuse—emotional pressure, coercion, threats, abduction, physical abuse, rape, human trafficking, modern-day slavery, domestic servitude, and sexual violence—occurring at any stage: entering into marriage, during the marriage, or when attempting to leave it (Gangoli and Chantler, 2009; Gangoli et al., 2011: 39). Similarly, McCabe and Eglan (2002: 3) purport looking at the 'substance' over the 'form' of forced marriage since the aforementioned forms of abuse are frequently hidden and unchallenged within the institution of marriage. Therefore, this study aligns itself with the perspective of a broader recognition of exploitation, control and oppression that occurs within the context of forced marriage. This study focuses on the coercive and controlling behaviours women face not only leading up to the forced marriage but also afterward. It supports Chantler and McCarry's (2020) view of forced marriage as a *process* that often begins in childhood leading to a loss of liberty and the broader trauma and impact experienced within that forced marriage.

## 2.2 Who does it happen to?

The FMU and academic research on forced marriage consistently acknowledges women and young girls to be experiencing a forced marriage (Gill and Anitha, 2009; Home Office and FCO, 2023). In 2022, FMU gave advice or supported in 302 forced marriage cases, with 78% cases involving female victims and 22% involving male victims (ibid). There is increasing academic interest in men's experiences of forced marriage and an exploration into the gendered difference in the perpetration and experience of forced marriage (Chantler, 2020; Gill and Harvey, 2016; Samad, 2010; Idriss, 2020a; Dutt, 2020). In 2022, a notable proportion of forced marriage cases recorded by the FMU involved young victims: 14% were aged 15 and under, 16% were aged 16 or 17, and 26% were aged 18 to 21. Younger victims were often linked to promises of future marriages or were siblings of those directly at risk, rather than facing immediate forced marriage. Additionally, 15% of cases involved individuals aged 26 to 30, and 12%

involved those aged 31 and older (Home Office and FCO, 2023). While considering who experiences a forced marriage, it is equally important to consider that some individuals may not recognise what is happening to them as 'forced' at the time of the marriage, or even later (Chantler and McCarry, 2020: 94), thus impacting the overall statistics. Others may not report or find it difficult to speak out due to fear of repercussions (Chantler et al., 2009). As a result, accurately determining the prevalence of forced marriages in the UK remains challenging.

In the UK, forced marriage is thought to be most prevalent within South Asian communities, with most cases being linked to Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (Home Office and FCO,2018). Whilst most forced marriage cases in the UK are linked to the Indian subcontinent, it is important to de-homogenise instances as solely constituting an overseas element; in other words, forced marriages follow no typical geographical trajectory (Chantler and McCarry, 2020: 92). Commentators note that this is challenging, particularly because the FMU is situated within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office rather than the Home Office (Dustin and Phillips, 2008: 410; Hunter, 2011). Since more women are affected than men (although dismissal of the latter must be avoided), a threat or actual occurrence of a forced marriage can involve:

- UK-born women taken out of the UK to South Asian countries of origin for marriage

- UK-born South Asian women being married to UK-born South Asian men

- South Asian- born men entering the UK for the purpose of marriage

- South Asian- born women entering the UK for the purpose of marriage

The idea that forced marriage is a distinctly South Asian phenomenon has been challenged, and its occurrence in African, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is cited (Chantler, Gangoli and Hester, 2009: 599; Begikhani and Gill, 2015; Frías, 2017; Home Office and FCO, 2018). Research also highlights the need to recognise similar forms of forced marriage, such as "shotgun" marriages in dominant white communities (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011). Forced marriage among individuals with learning disabilities is underexplored. Clawson and Fyson (2017) note that while these cases share racial similarities with forced marriages of those without disabilities, they differ in age and gender dynamics. This emerging research is crucial for understanding forced marriage more comprehensively and addressing the experiences of this vulnerable group.

## 2.3 Charting Links: 'Honour', 'Honour'-based Abuse (HBA) and Forced Marriage

Most literature on forced marriage makes abundant links to that on HBA. Dyer (2015: 27) notes that one can "never have forced marriage without HBA, ever". HBA is a complex concept, encompassing actions against those perceived to violate community or family norms, thereby bringing dishonour or shame upon their families (Julios, 2015; Bates, 2021; Gangoli et al., 2023). HBA predominantly targets women for actions such as engaging in pre-marital relationships, dating outside their religion, race or caste, adopting Western behaviours, or choosing non-traditional clothing. Crimes under the umbrella of HBA include forced marriages and female genital mutilation, alongside kidnapping, assault, virginity testing, enforced abortion, and murder (Idriss, 2017; Mulvihill et al., 2019; Aujla, 2020; Bates, 2021). HBA is seen as:

> acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonour upon family. A woman can be targeted by her family for: refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce – even from an abusive husband – or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that 'dishonours' her family is sufficient to trigger an attack on her life [.] (Human Rights Watch, 2001, quoted in Ballard, 2011: 125; Gill and Aujla, 2014)

Contrastingly, literature also notes the active role mothers play in perpetrating HBA than previously considered due to reliance on gender role expectations and mothers' adherence to the 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti, 1988; Sen, 2005; Rew et al., 2013: 148; Roberts, 2014). Aplin (2017) highlights that mothers are often responsible for much of the violence or abuse toward daughters. They may also be blamed if their daughters act 'dishonourably', which could explain why they condone or commit violence (Gill, 2014a; Walker and Gill, 2019). Mothers' behaviours are driven more by a need for self-preservation and protecting their reputation than by duty or cultural obligation, especially when considering perpetration of HBA in the context of 'illegitimate' pregnancies (Welden, 2010: 389). Outside the realm of families, community members in the UK, and even extended kin in countries of origin, are often involved in the continuation of HBA. Dyer (2015: 29) notes community involvement in the form of denial, silence, complicity, and defending the acts of violence. The community may also participate in determining the punishment for women who engage in transgressive behaviours and in mobilising networks of 'bounty hunters' to track down women who attempt to escape their families (Julios, 2015; Idriss, 2017: 9-11).

Welchman and Hossain (2005: 4) argue that forced marriage can substantively be a harbinger or result of HBA. Not only the rejection of forced marriage but even exiting or escaping it puts women at risk of further, sometimes more extreme forms of HBA, i.e. 'honour' killing (Baker et al., 1999:168; Siddiqui, 2000: 50; Hossain, 2011). Whilst it is noted that forced marriage falls on the continuum of HBA (Siddiqui, 2000: 50; Gill, 2014; Dyer, 2015; Idriss, 2018), most literature on HBA focuses on extreme and fatal cases of forced marriage, under-researching what leads to killing of women (Welchman and Hossain, 2005; Gill, 2006: 2-5; 2014a: 180; Aujla, 2020). A possible reason is that the nature of violence involved in 'honour' killings mean that such offences outrank forced marriage. It can be argued that despite forced marriage, in and of itself being a form of HBA, a certain specificity of forced marriage is endorsed in the wider HBA literature which undermines non-fatal but equally abusive cases of forced marriage (Kaur, 2019).

## 2.3.1 A closer look into 'Honour' and Shame

Pitt-Rivers defines 'honour' as a "sentiment, a manifestation of this sentiment in conduct, and the evaluation of this sentiment in conduct by others, that is to say, reputation" (1968: 503 cited in Wikan, 1984: 638). 'Honour' is also tied to class status, where one's social standing is reinforced by public reputation and the symbolic capital earned through acts of generosity and hospitality (Gill, 2014a: 2). Werbner (2007: 162) broadens the concept of 'honour' beyond its common association with women's sexuality and gender, encompassing a wider range of social behaviours and attributes. Behaviours such as showing respect to guests, demonstrating leadership, and offering support to those of lower status, are also crucial in establishing and maintaining 'honour' (ibid). This broader view of 'honour' highlights that it is tied not only to gendered control but also to broader social hierarchies and expectations.

Women, and women's bodies, form the centre-stage of 'honour'-based societies where 'honour' is a social order maintained, managed and preserved by "male control over women's social and sexual conduct- actual, potential or perceived" (Welchman and Hossain, 2005). Men are responsible for maintaining 'honour' by controlling 'their womenfolk' from bringing dishonour (Reddy, 2014) and cleansing the source of dishonour "as a public display of patriarchal power" (Gill, 2014a: 3). 'Honour' primarily relates to male members of the family. Deference, fidelity, chastity and modest social conduct govern the intimate and social lives of women in patriarchal communities; and sexual promiscuity, extra-marital affairs, romantic involvement with men disapproved of by family, rejecting family-

approved matches and pre-marital sex amounts to non-conformity and bring 'shame' to the entire family (Meeto and Mirza, 2010: 42; Gill and Brah, 2013). Shame caused by transgressive behaviour is synonymous with humiliation and embarrassment, and reaffirming 'honour' after a shameful transgression becomes a priority in 'honour'-based societies (Mandelbaum, 1988: 23 cited in Gill, 2014; Wikan, 1984). 'Honour' and shame as analytical concepts have been employed by feminist researchers such as Amrit Wilson (2006: 12) to understand the patriarchal hierarchy and the contexts in which they arise, serving to disenfranchise and oppress women, shaping how individuals act, and control women.

'Honour' is not exclusive to minority cultures but is a key component of patriarchal systems worldwide (Chantler & Gangoli, 2011; Gangoli et al., 2011: 33). In their comparative study, Baker et al. (1999) highlight how the concept of 'honour' differs in Western communities by shifting the control over female behaviour from family members to intimate partners. They note, "The difference is that the male who kills to assert his control is the intimate partner, not the brother or father" (Baker et al., 1999: 174). In Western contexts, 'honour' becomes a means for intimate partners to maintain male dominance, masking it as 'personal privilege' (ibid; Sen, 2005: 51).

Sociological studies suggest that men are often praised within their communities for "rectifying sullied 'honour'" and upholding patriarchal norms (Gill, 2006:4; Siddiqui, 2005: 278; Welden, 2010: 382; Gill, 2014a). In contrast, anthropological discussions point out that women rarely receive recognition for upholding 'honour' (Bond, 2014; Metlo, 2012). Women's efforts to maintain 'honour' often involve concealing family violence to avoid bringing shame (Siddiqui, 2005). The concept of shame, or '*sharam*,' is closely tied to 'honour,' with shame arising from deviations from expected female behaviours (Gill, 2014). Mandelbaum (1988:23) highlights that 'honour' must be actively maintained and defended, while Wikan (2008) notes that 'honour'-based societies focus on avoiding shame and dishonour. In such settings, women lack independent 'honour,' as their reputations are tied to their families, either enhancing or damaging family 'honour' (Melto, 2012:27). Non-conformity by women can lead to efforts to restore perceived damaged 'honour', including severe acts of violence (Welchman and Hossain, 2005; Idriss, 2017)

The family serves as the central locus of 'honour,' with its values, beliefs, and behaviours—both private and public—playing a crucial role in shaping how the family is perceived by others. This highlights not only the significant social and personal importance attached to 'honour' but also its function as a connection between the individual and the broader community. In British South Asian communities, 'honour' regulates female sexuality and behaviour, making a woman's safety and belonging conditional

on conforming to these norms (Welchman and Hossain, 2005). Women may feel pressured to adhere to 'honour' codes due to family and social pressures, prioritising communal respect over personal desires (Sharif, 2012; Scutt, 2014; Vogt-William, 2019). This tension between public and private motivations often goes unexamined, with literature focusing on public punishments (Sen, 2005; Gill, 2014; Idriss, 2017) rather than the broader sociological context where community expectations shape and maintain 'honour' (Roberts, 2014: 76-77). This gap in understanding suggests that 'honour' is not solely produced and maintained within the family but is deeply embedded in the community's collective identity and expectations (Roberts, 2014; Mayeda et al., 2019). There is evidence in the literature that when female transgression becomes public knowledge, family councils (whether in UK or home country) are activated to decide the punishment for transgression, and in some cases, may also command a lifelong death sentence on women who escape (Idriss, 2017: 7-8).

Vogt-William (2019: 344) notes that 'honour' is deeply tied to the investment in heterosexual marriage to uphold kinship structures. In South Asian diasporic communities, 'honour' is closely linked to female sexuality, shaping how women navigate generational and cultural expectations (Sanghera, 2009). 'Honour' becomes a socially constructed order, often maintained through male control over women's conduct, especially regarding their sexuality, serving as a tool for gendered power dynamics (Welchman and Hossain, 2005). In her autobiography, forced marriage victim-survivor and the founder of Karma Nirvana writes that:

> trying to explain the concept of 'honour' is one of the hardest things . . . Asian people don't question it: . . . it's as though they absorb it with their mother's milk. 'honour' – *izzat* – is the cornerstone of the Asian community and since the beginning of time, it's been the job of girls and women to keep it "polished" [sic]. Wearing lipstick, owning a mobile phone, cutting your hair; any of those things could be said to bring dishonour on a family because those are all signs that a girl is getting westernised, which is what Asian families fight so hard against. (Sanghera, 2009: 25).

Sanghera highlights how migrant families are judged not only by the behaviour of their female members but also by their ability to maintain control over them, which elevates their respectability within the community. This desire for acceptance and respect drives families to uphold cultural norms, especially regarding gender-specific 'honour' codes (Gill, 2014; Vogt-William, 2019). Embracing these ideals can enhance a family's status and prestige within the community, where respect and belonging are linked to maintaining 'honour.' However, in the British South Asian community, these expectations often lead to control of women under the guise of preserving family 'honour'. Sanghera (2009) also

points to the intergenerational transmission of 'honour' which is deeply tied to fears of Westernisation, often used to justify patriarchal control masked as preservation of cultural and religious values. Reddy (2014) underscores the significance of intergenerational dynamics in understanding how 'honour' is maintained and enforced within families and communities. 'Honour' is not just an immediate familial concern but extends across generations, influencing behaviour and norms related to cultural identity, gender politics, and faith. The contrast between the "traditional" South Asian woman and the "modern" Westernised woman reflects anxieties about losing patriarchal authority and cultural identity, often legitimised by faith-based justifications (Gill and Hamed, 2016; Siddiqui, 2005).

## 2.3.2 Forced Marriage as a means to control female sexuality and preserve 'honour'

"When a daughter of the family is misbehaving, or gets caught doing something wrong, like with a boyfriend" or in a same-sex relationship, it can effectively cause a forced marriage (Chantler et al., 2009: 604). In 'honour'-based societies, sexual purity is highly regarded, and even a rumour or initial threat to it can trigger immediate responses in the form of forced marriage (Gill et al., 2012: 81). Additionally, presupposition with "compulsory heterosexuality" suggests not only that all marriages are heterosexual, but also that the natural order of social structures represent male dominance and female oppression (Gangoli et al., 2011: 27). Therefore, compulsory 'heterosexualisation' of a gay son/daughter can be a reason for forced marriage (Gangoli and Chantler, 2009: 283-4; Hunter, 2011; Gangoli et al., 2023). There is a perceived need to control and correct what is viewed as deviant sexuality. Any deviation from these rigid norms of expected behaviour necessitates strict control (Jaspal, 2020). Forced marriage is often portrayed as a remedy to these deviations, as anything out of the norm, in this case, a gay son/daughter, is considered transgressive (Jaspal, 2014; Chantler, 2020).

The literature has found that when women pursue education or work opportunities, this may lead to "unacceptable relationships". As a result, forced and early marriages are used as a pre-emptive measure to prevent such outcomes (Samad and Eades, 2002: 56). 'Inappropriate' relationships with men outside women's own religion, kin or caste can also amount to transgression of 'honour'. Some known forced marriage cases in the UK did have a significant element of reaction against women dating which eventually led to killings of women in the name of 'honour'. Banaz Mahmod, was killed at the age of 20 by her father and uncle for dishonouring the family by leaving her husband and forming a relationship with another man. Banaz experienced physical violence from her father, forced marriage, and domestic violence at the hands of her husband. She was followed and her movements monitored by her family. Banaz was tortured, raped, sexually assaulted, and murdered by three men

hired by her uncle to kill her (McVeigh, 2012; Begikhani and Gill, 2015). Samia Shahid, a Bradford born woman, divorced her first husband whom she was forced to marry, and later married a man she fell in love with, an act her family did not approve. She was tricked into visiting Pakistan where she was murdered by her ex-husband and father (Siddiqui, 2016; Kaur, 2019). Shafilea Ahmed, born in 1986 in Pakistan, moved to the UK with her family. In her late teens, Shafilea resisted her family's attempts to force her into a marriage. Her refusal to comply with these demands and her desire for autonomy clashed with her family's cultural and honour-based expectations. In 2003, Shafilea was killed by her parents, Iftikhar and Farzana Ahmed, who were convicted of her murder in 2012. The parents' actions were motivated by a perceived need to restore their family's honour, wherein Shafilea's refusal to enter into a marriage of *their* choice was seen as compromising (Gill, 2014).

Chantler (2014: 23-24) discusses how marriages of choice without parental approval are seen as illicit and unsanctioned, significantly negating women's choice and agency which are attributed to "the vagaries of adolescence, a hormonal flush, a kind of madness, or an irresponsible expression of a dangerous desire" (Chakravarti, 2005: 321; Chantler, 2014). Additionally, the dating experiences of South Asian women in the UK highlight how cultural constraints around 'honour' and marriage norms limit their choices. As explored by Sandhu and Barrett (2024), these constraints are rooted in fear of dishonour, leading to coercive practices that restrict women's agency and can culminate in forced marriages. Dating is perceived as a threat to family 'honour,' linking the experience of dating, with or without the intent to marry, to the broader issue of forced marriage. When women do marry self-selected partners without parental approval, studies (Chakravarti, 2005; Hossain, 2011) show that parents often respond by alleging their daughter was 'abducted' and raped by her chosen husband, in turn invalidating the marriage.

## 2.4 South Asian women's socialisation into marriage and limited marital choice

A social norm, as defined by Scott (2014: 519), refers to "a shared expectation of behaviour that is considered culturally desirable or appropriate". Marriage is one such norm which is viewed as a "legally recognised relationship between, between an adult male and female, that carries certain rights and obligations" (Scott, 2014: 441). A liberal view of it includes cohabitation but excludes same-sex relationships. However, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 in England and Wales reflects the evolving nature of marriage as a social norm, now including same-sex marriage within public discourse (Jowett, 2014). Historically, heterosexual marriages were more about economic and political alliances than individual choice or romantic love (Coontz, 2005). These unions served to organise daily life, raise

families, and ensure regular sexual relations, with love often not seen as a legitimate reason for marriage (Sandhu, 2019). Over time, especially in Western Europe and North America since the 18th century, love became a more accepted basis for marriage, where individuals began choosing their partners (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Coontz, 2005). However, feminists argue that marriage is a complex institution shaped by social norms, beliefs, and inequalities related to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (Bernard, 1982; Stanley & Wise, 1993; hooks, 2000; Christina, 2002; Walby, 2011).

hooks' (1981:15) definition of patriarchy as "institutionalised sexism" effectively captures the structural systems and power imbalances impacting South Asian women's marriage decisions and gender and sexual role expectations within the marriage. Patriarchy oppresses women in various ways, leading to differing experiences of oppression (Lorde, 1996). Narayan (2001: 418) argues that liberal feminists should respect how women from other cultures navigate patriarchy within their unique constraints, rather than viewing them as entirely "prisoners" or "dupes" of the system. The historical and current context of race and class oppression faced by racially minoritised women is essential for understanding how power dynamics subjugate them within marital, familial and community relationships (Amos and Parmar, 1984: 9). South Asian women's conditioning happens within patriarchal structures related to family, marriage, divorce, and close family relationships, wherein patriarchal control dictates women's status, privileges men, and enforces control over women's lives (Wilson, 2006; Anitha and Gill, 2009). Understanding these women's introduction to how they are expected to conform to family narrative, along with their experiences of transgressing gender roles or facing domestic abuse, requires considering the historical, political, and social contexts of their lives.

Social and cultural contexts shape gender norms, leading to the internalisation of stereotypes and gender differences (Fine, 2011). Oakley (2016) notes that children are socialised into gender roles from birth, often favouring one gender over the other; for example, boys are held longer by their mothers than girls, and girls being directed towards nurturing toys like dolls. Richardson (2015: 10) calls this process of learning gendered ideas and practices "the process of becoming gendered". Feminism has focused on understanding the different statuses and values assigned to men and women in society (Sandhu, 2019: 50). Gender-role expectations, particularly for women, emphasise their primary role as wives and mothers, which constitutes their socialisation into marriage (Okin, 2002). This can limit girls' aspirations, especially in education and career choices (Richardson, 2015: 11). The emphasis on women as caregivers ensures that successful careers outside the home do not disrupt the traditional power balance within the family (Oakley, 2016: 139). Additionally, women are socialised to uphold the father's role as protector (Hearn, 2013).

In the context of South Asian women's socialisation into marriages and marital choices, it has been argued that all types of marriages are a show of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Hester et al., 2007) where men and women are inevitably, emotionally and sexually, bound to be together as a universal rule. The homogeneity of compulsory sexuality leads to gendered inequalities with a strong presence of "male right of physical, economical, and emotional access within marriage" (Rich, 1980: 26). When exploited, marriage become a way of controlling women and their deviant sexualities. "The hegemonic effect of marriages as a socio-cultural expectation is that women are schooled to be 'willing victims' of marriage" and hence consent is inherently compromised (Hester, 1992; Gangoli et al., 2011: 28).

Literature on socialisation of young South Asians in the UK indicates that women are socialised into a model of ideal femininity that prioritises others' needs—especially those of parents—over their own (Bhopal, 2000; Gill and Harvey, 2016). This socialisation involves early exposure to the idea of marriage as an inevitable life event, intertwined with notions of family 'honour' and obedience (Chantler and McCarry, 2020). Women are often taught that their worth and identity are closely linked to their ability to maintain family 'honour', which is achieved through modesty, submissiveness, and conformity to parental expectations (Abu Amara, Guine, and Hamel, 2013). In this context, marriage is not a personal milestone but a cultural obligation that reflects broader familial and communal values. The emphasis on parental choice in marriage decisions underscores the expectation that women should prioritise their parents' wishes, seeing them as synonymous with their own interest and happiness (Bhopal, 2000: 40-41). This dynamic often leaves women with limited agency, as the fear of bringing shame or dishonour to the family reinforces their compliance with parents' choice in the marriage. Consequently, ideal femininity in this context is defined by a woman's capacity to uphold family 'honour' through parental obedience and subordination of personal desires to collective expectations (Scutt, 2014; Gill and Harvey, 2016).

Idealisation of femininity within South Asian families reflects a broader patriarchal structure where women's identities and choices are circumscribed by their roles as daughters and wives. Dominant narratives often define them as ideal wives and mothers (Kallivayalil, 2010). They are also expected to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs (Cowburn, Gill, and Harrison, 2015). This socialisation can act as a form of coercion, emphasising success in relationships above all else (Anitha and Gill, 2009). In the context of domestic abuse, this gendered socialisation has historically oppressed women while liberating men (Patel, 2003b: 249). Men dictate community values, while women face significant consequences for violating these norms. Thus, for South Asian women, cultural experiences are integral to their socialisation and development as gendered individuals. Understanding how cultural

values enforce silence and limit women's choices is crucial, particularly within the power dynamics of marriage and community, where concepts like 'honour' and shame play key roles (ibid). The socialisation of girls and women often intertwines gender expectations with marital expectations, creating a framework where adherence to both is crucial (Simmons and Burn, 2013).

Contrastingly, men experience different socialisation regarding marriage, allowing them to reject proposals without significant consequences (Bhopal, 2000; Gill and Harvey, 2016). They often dismiss forced marriage as a "women's issue" trivialising their own experiences of it (Samad, 2010; Dutt, 2020). This view is reinforced by societal beliefs that men, due to their gender, cannot be coerced unless they deviate from heteronormative masculinity (Idriss, 2020a). Conversely, women's marital consent is often controlled by family, as they are not seen as fully capable of making informed choices (Chantler, 2012: 177). The next section delves into the complexities of consent.

## 2.5 Consent and Coercion: In between and beyond

Consent and coercion in the context of forced marriage are not clear-cut. A problem with a solely consent-based understanding ignores the complexity of circumstances under which consent itself is constructed and framed. It also does not empower an individual to take cognisance of the forceful nature or coercive potential of the factors/circumstances encumbering them (Mody, 2016). There is a need to position the intimate relationship between wider socio-cultural expectations and individual consent, and resultantly notice the gravity, intensity and primacy of varying forms of pressures which are coercive in nature. Consent can rightly be understood as neither a one-off nor a straightforward concept. Anitha and Gill (2009; 2011) have contributed to a conceptually evolved understanding of forced marriage where consent and coercion form two ends of a continuum between which lie multiple degrees of intersecting structural inequalities, power imbalances, assumed and expected socio-cultural norms, threats, persuasion, and fear, all of which deeply reflect the nature of consent, the intent and burden of coercion.

In the context of forced marriage, coercion relates to the circumstances which overbear an individual's initial will. A limited definition of coercion or duress prevailed from a socio-legal point of view which primarily recognised either physical force or threat of physical force, ultimately only considering "an immediate threat to life, limb or liberty" (Philips and Dustin, 2004). The case of *Hussein (Otherwise Blitz) v Hussein* [1938] highlights the nascent legal and policy interpretations of coercion as it was

theorised merely in terms of physical force or (gravity of the) threats of it (Anitha and Gill, 2011: 50-51). The petitioner was successful in getting the marriage annulled on the grounds that it was agreed to under severe intimidation from the respondent who repeatedly threatened to kill her if she did not marry him. The court annulled the marriage on the grounds that the petitioner's free will was compromised and endangered. Interestingly, in the case of *Mahmud v Mahmud* [1994], UK courtrooms moved from a concrete distinction between consent and coercion, however with some paradoxical closing remarks. A 30-year-old British Pakistani man agreed to marry his cousin from Pakistan due to intense parental pressure, though he never consummated the marriage. He testified in court that he was compelled by parental obligation, particularly after his father's dying wish was for him to marry according to family wishes. The non-physical coercion exerted upon him undermined his ability to give full and free consent. While the court declared the marriage invalid, the judge acknowledged that some level of parental coercion might be seen as legitimate if the ultimate aim is to 'influence a change of mind':

> "In my opinion parents, and indeed others, are well entitled to exert their influence, and indeed to apply pressure, upon a person who is refusing to marry, with a view to producing a change of mind….I would also emphasise that if under pressure– and perhaps very considerable pressure– a party does indeed change his or her mind and consents to a marriage with however ill a grace and however resentfully, then the marriage is in my opinion valid" (Anitha and Gill, 2011: 52)

This case demonstrates the need to problematise existing notions of coercion and consent. Firstly, the relevance given to parental will versus individual choice gives an insight to what is perceived as legitimate parental involvement in marital decision making. In the same vein, 'loving manipulation' and persuasion is also used as *justified* (author emphasis) duress as "parents feel they are acting in their children's and family's best interests" (Uddin and Ahmed, 2000: 11; Samad and Eades, 2002: 28). However, the court's judgment of resentful and unwilling capitulation with however 'ill a grace' gives more importance to the very forces which compel individuals to 'just go with the marriage'. To fully understand the complexities of making an informed choice, it is essential to critically examine and reconsider the impact of various pressures exerted during moments of dissent. These pressures often include familial obligations, concepts of 'honour,' parental expectations, duties towards parents, respect for elders and the need to set a 'good' example for younger siblings (Anitha and Gill, 2011). It has been argued that emotional duress facilitates 'constrained volition' where individuals anticipate or encounter undesirable alternatives, and thus make a 'rational choice' (Wertheimer, 1987). Women are

positioned at the intersection of several inequalities such as immigration status, obligation to kin, deference to elders, fear of reprisal and loss of 'honour' which make it problematic to "contrast a marriage contracted through coercion with self-constituting, free individuals entering into a consensual marriage" (Gill and Anitha, 2009: 171). The authors point towards the over-determined approach of seeing the subject as a rational, autonomous and independent being, disregarding the disproportionate contexts in which their agency is restricted.

Notably, consent and coercion are in fact two ends of a continuum, which incorporates the complex and subtle forms of coercion which result in consent being invoked, assumed, pre-empted, and in some cases, rendered meaningless and piecemeal (Gangoli et al., 2011). The forcefulness of duty and obligation coalesce to form 'obedient' consent, which is perceived as a byproduct of socialisation into 'honour' narrative, and no deviations are entertained (Mody, 2016: 202). A grey area between consent and coercion exists where the gendered notions of 'honour' and shame "may cause a woman to feel that she has no choice but to consent to a marriage to avoid stigmatising her family" (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006: 11). Social and family expectations from women and girls impose as emotional pressure, highlighting that consent may be given without any explicit threats, but in the broader context of power, control and gendered expectations (Chantler, 2012). Also, consent cannot be divorced from the pressure to fulfil expected gender roles. Women can be "culturally imposed to consent by filial, religious or traditional duty to agree to parental wishes rather than marriage itself" (Scutt, 2014: 96). Familial power dynamics (intergenerational or parental) serve to exploit victims-survivors' sense of abandonment, eventually limiting women's involvement (Shariff, 2012: 561; Gill and Gould, 2019). "Accepting does not mean wanting" (Fraisse, 2007 cited in Abu Amara, Guiné, and Hamel, 2013: 23) becomes clear because "refusal to consent to a marriage that will result in potential loss of family, and thus community, is perceived as inherently coercive by many women" (Anitha and Gill, 2009: 176).


## 2.6 Arranged Marriage– Forced Marriage: Grey area

Arranged marriages are chiefly marriages where spouse selection is a 'trusted task' performed by elders in the family, such as parents, older siblings, extended family, but the final decision of accepting that selection or not lies with the to-be bride and groom (Pande, 2022). Chantler (2014) enhances understanding of arranged marriages by demonstrating how longevity of marriage and commitment

to it, based on rationality and practical concerns gains more precedence in South Asian communities. Therefore, family ties and kinship are inherently central to arranged marriages, with a hopeful expectation that love between the couple will grow once married. The process of doing arranged marriages has been echoed by early and recent studies on arranged marriage practices of South Asians in the UK (Kalra, 1980; Bhachu, 1985, Wilson, 1978; Bhopal, 2011; Pande, 2014; 2022). Bhopal (2000: 40) found that South Asian women identify with arranged marriages as the most 'honourable' way of getting married as 'it reaffirmed their South Asian identity'. Fulfilment of kinship obligations affords a sense of self to women who believe that "freedom is not what one is given, it is earned when you get married" as it elevates the 'honour' of women's parents (Mody, 2016: 204). In some cases, arranged marriages are considered a 'safer' way of marrying because the parents or the natal family are assumed to find the most suitable spouse, and are more willing to positively intervene in instances of marital discord (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006: 13; Gill and Harvey, 2016). In other cases, rather than openly expressing their choice of partner, South Asian women might engage in subtle negotiations to ensure that their marriage receives parental acceptance and approval. While this may not be always successful, it reflects the cultural belief that a woman's identity and self-worth are closely tied to her family's 'honour' and involvement in marital decisions (Pande, 2014: 177; Dutt, 2022).

Parents see their involvement as particularly important for the betterment of their children to the extent that "they consider the act of coercing the child into marriage as benign or even part of their duty as good parents" (Gill and Harvey, 2016: 85). Samad and Eades (2002) interviewed older South Asian population (parents and grandparents) who believed that it was their moral and religious duty to "get their children married" (28) while simultaneously noting a generational difference when younger population desired more freedom in choice of marriage partner (94-95). Whilst Bhopal (2000) inadequately addressed the degrees of pressures facing South Asian women participating in an arranged marriage (Ahmad, 2006), forced marriage researchers have attempted to unpack the porosity of the arranged- forced marriage distinction. A female participant from a study conducted in North-East England elucidates the difference between arranged and forced marriage as not having an opinion:

> "You're marrying him and that's it. You can't say yes and can't say no. You just have to do it. That to me is being forced into something. Whereas arrangement is yes or no." (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006: 12).

In the same study, some participants retrospectively recognised subtle signs of force in their 'arranged' marriage in the form of threats or invoking feelings of shame (10). Sometimes, parents themselves are in pressure from natal kin in their home countries to "'honour' longstanding family commitments and perceived religious and cultural ideals" (Shaw and Charsley, 2006: 412; Khanum, 2008: 9; Samad, 2010: 196). Gender interacts with culture in a way that women are strongly expected to be peacemakers in such cases and 'compromise' because deference to elders is part of their socialisation into 'honour' codes (Gill and Harvey, 2016: 19-20). Furthermore, deference to elders combines with emotional coercion where children are made to feel that not acquiescing will bring shame to the family (Samad, 2010: 200).

"Researching the realities of South Asian women's lived experiences necessitates the importance of recognition of the gradations of differences that exist from arranged marriage to forced marriage" (Sandhu, 2019: 43). Gangoli et al., (2011) argue that the strict separation of arranged marriages from forced marriages can obscure more subtle forms of coercion, leading to a "slippage" between the two. They highlight that certain levels of coercion have long been normalised within scholarship on arranged marriages (see Bhachu, 1985; Bhopal, 2000). Bredal (2011) understands coercion in arranged marriages as a spectrum of direct and indirect pressures. This aligns with Mody's (2016) view that obligation strongly influences marital consent, driven by kinship expectations, flouting which invites unpleasant community reactions. Mody illustrates this with a participant who acquiesced to her father's wishes of marrying her cousin, because "he had asked for something for the first time in her life" and relatives in her home country were gossiping about her "westernised" upbringing (202-203), which reflected poorly on her father. The inability to refuse an arranged marriage can be understood as a form of implicit coercion, where rejecting the arrangement is not truly an option. Examining this "slippage" reveals the subtle pressures at the margins of marital decision-making, shedding light on the varying degrees of coercion individuals may face. The failure to capture the subtleties of South Asian women's experiences is perpetuated by the dichotomy of arranged marriage and forced marriage.

## 2.7 Ongoing abuse after the forced marriage

The decision to leave a marriage and face social ostracism as a result involves more than just the emotional loss of close relationships—it can also mean the loss of one's identity and a sense of

belonging, as discussed by Reitman (2005) in terms of the "sociopsychological costs of exit". Women who consent to a marriage under coercion often remain in it due to the ongoing subtle pressures that make leaving seem impossible. Chantler et al. (2009: 606) argue that the same structural constraints which manifest during the entry point of forced marriage, reify to prevent women from exiting or escaping such marriages. Forced marriage, characterised by loss of choice, can lead to loss of other important rights creating situations of marital rape and forced pregnancies (Siddiqui, 2003: 88-89; Ouattara, Sen and Thomson, 1998). While Shariff (2012: 561) argues that marital decisions are made collectively and family consensus overrides individual choice, the natal family does not help when the woman experiences abuse later, evoking feelings of betrayal (Chantler and McCarry, 2020). This runs in stark contrast to some of the reasons quoted by women for acquiescing to their parents' wishes about their marriage and marriage partner, as discussed in Section 2.6. For instance, Chantler and McCarry (2020) note that a woman received no support from her natal family when she told them about her husband's abuse, reinforcing that domestic abuse follows a forced marriage (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006: 15), exacerbated by women's family's non-intervention. Therefore, women who endure violence and abuse after forced marriage, especially those already impacted by multiple structural inequalities, face compounded challenges and pressures that intensify their situation (Patel, 2013). Women subjected to violence and abuse after forced marriage, particularly those already marginalised by multiple structural inequalities, face intensified and compounded challenges (ibid). The impact of forced marriage extends far beyond the act itself; it subjects women to ongoing violence and abuse, highlighting the complex, process-driven nature of this issue.

Forced marriage can thus result in a range of serious harms like abduction, rape, forced pregnancy and domestic servitude (Thiara, 2010; Idriss, 2017; Gill and Gould, 2019; Gill and Walker, 2020). Literature has noted that owing to rape myths, testimonies of sexual assault and rape by husband in the forced marriage have been discounted (Noack-Lundberg, Gill and Anitha, 2021: 384). This is due to the marital norm that grants husbands sexual access to their wives' bodies (Fry, Munro and Smith, 2020). Therefore, women face additional issues and pressures at the intersection of various structural inequalities that compound their situation once the forced marriage has occurred (Patel, 2013). Interestingly, research notes that women do not categorise family's use of force or pressure to enter the marriage as domestic abuse, only seeing abuse by husband and in-laws as an act of domestic abuse (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006; Rew et al., 2013). Mirza (2017) highlights how violence by mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law, as reported by Pakistani women in Scotland, is often overlooked in mainstream understandings of domestic abuse. This aligns with existing research arguing that South

Asian women often experience abuse by multiple family members (Ahmad et al., 2004; Parmar, Sampson and Diamond, 2005; Thiara, 2005; Izzidien, 2008; Thiara and Gill, 2010; Gill, Cox and Weir, 2018). Even increasing pressures from the women's family to stay in the forced marriage is not seen as abuse, as evidenced in Chantler and McCarry (2020). There is a significant gap in research on South Asian women's experiences of abuse within the complex dynamics of their natal and marital families, beyond just intimate relationships. This research aims to fill this crucial gap by demonstrating the ongoing nature of control women face throughout the experience of forced marriage.

The significant pressure on women from their families to stay in abusive marriages, is accompanied with the onus of making the marriage work placed on the woman (Thiara, 2010: 161; Gangoli et al., 2023: 10). Disclosing abuse can be challenging, as it is seen as bringing dishonour to the family (Izzidien, 2008; Latif, 2010; Gill and Harvey, 2016; Gill and Harrison, 2019). Literature on violence against women in South Asian communities highlights how children are often weaponised to maintain women's subordination within abusive marriages (Patel, 2003; Thiara, 2010: 162). Perpetrators use threats of separating mothers from their children or harming the children to coerce women into staying in the abusive context, exploiting the cultural emphasis on maternal responsibility (Katz, 2022: 82). Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg (2023: 39) further see this as South Asian mothers not being able to "act as a protective force beyond a point", highlighting the childhood histories of neglect and abuse children can face.

Migrant women who come to the UK as foreign spouses face severe vulnerabilities due to their lack of access to public funds during the first two years of their stay. This situation is particularly detrimental for those who arrived after a forced marriage, as they are already in an exceptionally vulnerable position. No recourse to public funds (NRPF) leaves them entirely dependent on their husbands or in-laws, creating a power imbalance that can be exploited to perpetrate abuse (Anitha, 2010; 2011; Siddiqui, 2014; Gill and Anitha, 2023). These women often endure neglect, dependency, and abandonment, compounded by intersecting factors such as class, gender, race, language barriers, and the absence of a social support system (Bates et al., 2018; Thiara, 2020). In many cases, husbands and in-laws use the threat of deportation to trap these women in abusive marriages, knowing that the women's precarious immigration status makes them less likely to seek help (Day and Gill, 2020). The fear of deportation is particularly potent because it not only threatens the women's ability to stay in the UK but also subjects them to the risk of HBA in their home countries for "failing" in their marriages (Anitha, 2010). Furthermore, migrant women are also at risk of counter-allegations and deportation if they defend themselves against their abusers (Day and Gill, 2020). This legal and social vulnerability

pushes them towards a hostile environment where they face the option of either staying in abusive marriages or facing destitution and deportation. As a result, their experiences of abuse are intensified, and their avenues for escaping are severely limited. Women's children might also be used to keep them in the abusive marriage, preventing them from seeking any external help (Sharma and Gill, 2010). Recent studies emphasise how the nature of abuse experienced by migrant women not only reinforces gendered power imbalances but also complicates women's agency in resisting abuse (more in Section 2.8), as leaving the marriage could result in losing custody or damaging the child's prospects within the community (Roy, 2008; Bates et al., 2018; Day and Gill, 2020; Gill and Anitha, 2023). The intersection of cultural, familial, and gendered pressures coupled with insecure immigration status of women sustains abuse within the marriages.

The wider community is also a critical aspect of making women conform to the notions of 'honour' and continuously regulating female behaviour. The community acts as both the observer and enforcer of cultural norms, creating an environment where deviation is not only discouraged but actively policed (Hague, Gill, and Begikhani, 2013). Community includes relatives, neighbours and other community figures who monitor and regulate behaviour to ensure women's conformity to 'honour' codes even when in the marriage (Mayeda et al., 2019), showing that control extends beyond the family. This form of control compounds women's experiences of abuse, especially for those attempting to resist or escape forced marriages. The pervasive monitoring and collective enforcement of norms, and punishment for transgressing these norms by the community (Julios, 2015; Idriss, 2017) make it difficult for women to seek help or assert their autonomy. This aligns with other research highlighting the role of the community in perpetuating HBA (Bates, 2021) showing that coercion is maintained through a network of social relationships that reinforce cultural expectations around 'honour'. It has been consistently noted that fear of community ostracism makes it difficult for women to leave domestic abuse within marriages (Burman et al., 2004; Mayeda et al., 2019; Anitha, 2023) with no degree of acceptance or support from the community (Walker, 2020). The community, in this sense, becomes a site for both longed-for support and significant oppression, complicating the already challenging dynamics of abuse within the forced marriage.

## 2.8 Understanding South Asian women's choice and agency

In political discussions about community cohesion and forced marriage, freedom of choice is framed by politicians as a key British value, essential to the sense of British identity (Hunter, 2011). Consequently, coercing someone into marriage is deemed behaviour that falls outside what is acceptable for belonging in Britain (Enright, 2009). It is argued that a "new discourse of personal freedom" regarding marriage decisions is necessary, one that considers the experiences, agency, and the structural challenges faced by South Asian women (Anitha and Gill, 2009: 179). This emphasises the importance of agency in the context of choice, coercion, and consent. Like Sandhu (2019: 57), I contend that South Asian women are acutely aware of the potential consequences, such as upsetting or losing contact with their families, when they challenge social norms around marriage and risk being seen as dishonouring their families, as discussed previously. This awareness may lead some women to a capitulate to parental wishes about their marriage or stay in abusive marriages—a decision that represents a form of agency and demonstrates resilience (Wilson, 2007; Anitha and Gill, 2009).

Phillips and Dustin (2004) contend that the discourse on forced marriage has focused on encouraging women to leave a forced marriage, which often means leaving their families and communities. This perspective creates a dichotomy that oversimplifies the realities faced by South Asian women, overlooking the complexities of their experiences, including the fear of losing family connections (Walker, 2020). This fear illustrates how coercion and control can significantly influence a woman's agency and decision-making, even when in the forced marriage. The act of leaving one's family due to a forced marriage is seen through a Western lens of freedom of choice, suggesting that South Asian women who exercise this choice are affirming their British identity, while their parents' involvement in arranging or forcing marriage is viewed as negating that identity (Enright 2009: 341; Gill, 2014a). Reitman (2005) critiques the idea that women from racially minoritised groups leaving their families, culture, and communities due to oppression will lead to transformative change within those groups. Such a critique helps in highlighting the importance of feminist scholarship which challenges the portrayal of South Asian women as passive and lacking agency (Amos and Parmar, 1984; Mirza, 1997; Mahmood, 2005). Pande (2014: 81–82) calls for an exploration of agency without reducing South Asian women to victims. She emphasises the need to develop feminist knowledge that truly reflects the lived experiences of South Asian women. This includes recognising forms of agency that are rooted in non-Western cultures and the strengths these women find in exercising that agency. Mirza (2018: 46-49) notes degrees of agency and resistance by South Asian women in the face of violence from their in-laws: self-placating to subtle resistance and calling out. Thus, agency is exercised amid patriarchal

gendered norms of marriage conventions showing that South Asian women do in fact manifest signs of agency (see Mohammad's 2015:20; Pande, 2014).

Furthermore, Majumdar (2007) critiques feminist scholars who impose a binary framework of "traditional" versus "modern" and who confine South Asian women's agency to a narrative that aligns with progressive mainstream society (see also Siddiqui, 2014). Racially minoritised women are increasingly and problematically viewed through two unequivocal lenses (Gill, 2014). First, they are completely constrained with visible signs of absolute restrictions for instance, *hijab* or the headscarf. Second, they are considered to be emancipated only when they embrace the 'civilising', 'modern' and neoliberal discourses of the West; equating racially minoritised women's ability to defy restrictions with that of liberated white women. South Asian feminist researchers argue that such binarisation dismisses women's agency (Anitha and Gill, 2009) and only glorifies 'spectacular expressions of resistance' (Das, 2010: 137). This dominant portrayal of forced marriage from a culturalist perspective fails to consider underlying familial patriarchal context, the everyday acts of negotiations and agency women manifest within them (Das, 2010), and diversity of their experiences.

Mahmood's critique of the concept of agency challenges the common feminist belief that all individuals inherently desire freedom, naturally seek autonomy when given the opportunity, and that true agency is primarily found in actions that defy social norms rather than those that conform to them (Mahmood 2005: 5). This becomes useful in contextualising women's marital choice and the process of decision-making when it comes to leaving or staying in forced marriages, particularly when they have experienced domestic abuse within these marriages. South Asian women's agency and decision-making around marriage often involve navigating social norms imposed by their families, as shown earlier. This negotiation reflects patriarchal power dynamics, illustrating how patriarchy, power, and agency are interconnected. Families may exert patriarchal control over women's behaviour, yet these women may still find ways, big or small, to resist that control. Mahmood (2005: 14) emphasises the importance of rethinking how feminists view agency, noting a tendency to equate agency solely with acts that challenge or redefine social norms. She argues that what may seem like passive or submissive behaviour from a progressive standpoint could actually represent a form of agency, one that can only be understood within the specific discourses and structures of subordination that shape it (ibid).

## 2.9 Challenging 'culturalist' framings of forced marriage

In the UK and other Western settings, forced marriage is often seen as a form of abuse inherent to particular racially minoritised communities, cultures and religion (Enright, 2009: 339).

> "Women of the Global South who confront specific marriage practices that infringe on their rights often find themselves entangled within a cultural debate that imposes on women a choice between enduring oppression in silence or siding with imperialist/ethnocentric projects. This dilemma is rooted in the colonial experience which selectively targeted certain gender-related norms and institutions to promote the imperialists' 'civilising' agenda" (Erturk, 2011: xii)

Research demonstrates the media portrayal of forced marriage as depicting women as passive victims of an oppressive, deterministic culture (Anitha and Gill, 2015: 1130). These narratives suggest that women's survival hinges on rejecting their cultural backgrounds and embracing Western norms and values, reinforcing stereotypes of cultural 'otherness'. Through this imperialist discourse highlighting the transformation of victim-survivors as they distance themselves from their "former" culture, the media perpetuates the view that forced marriage is rooted in cultural traditions that must be abandoned for assimilation into Western society, which is portrayed as inherently gender-equal (Enright, 2009). Scholars strongly assert that such oversimplified narratives are convenient ways of attributing causation to culture, invites stigmatisation and othering of racially minoritised communities, bolsters a racist and Islamophobia narrative and resist confrontation with patriarchal violence (Gill, 2006; Wilson, 2007; Brandon and Hafez, 2008; Eshareturi et al., 2014; Gill and Hamed, 2016)

Razack (2004) outlines Western assumptions underlying the catchphrase 'clash of cultures', a result of 'unassimilable immigrants' (132-133) who originate from backward, feudal and lawless lands valuing the kinship law and order of their home countries than the conventional justice system (Brah, 1996). As 'feudal culture reproduces on European soil' (Razack, 2004: 136), the West self-embodies itself as morally superior, and views minority men as murderers and forced marriage aficionados. This strong commentary aligns with Anitha and Gill (2009: 178) who advocate for understanding women's experience of structural constraints rather than conceptualising them as 'in need of saving' from 'their own deviant cultures'. These discourses serve as a battleground for negotiating cultural identity and power, where forced marriage is often framed in a way that contrasts British cultural superiority and liberal values with the perceived regressive practices of minoritised groups, thereby reinforcing 'othering' stereotypes (Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2010; Anitha and Gill, 2015)

"Stereotyping non-Western cultures as the ultimate cause of violence against women normalises the patriarchal structures that constrain Western women" (Gill, 2014: 179). By attributing violence primarily to "other" cultures, this false narrative detracts from the recognition of gender-based violence that is rooted in systemic inequalities worldwide, including in the West (Narayan, 1997; Razack, 2004). This essentialism ultimately undermines the global feminist movement by fragmenting solidarity and reducing the issue of forced marriage to a cultural problem rather than an aspect of wider framework on violence against women. In her novel research concerning forced marriage in Ireland, Yasmin Kutub identifies abusive contexts which force women from dominant white communities into marriage: controlling boyfriends who seek marriage as a way of further controlling women, but notes that such experiences are not integrated in the broader conceptualisation of forced marriage (Yasmin Kutub, personal communication, 20th April 2020). The gendered pressures directed towards white women who are forced to conceal their pregnancy by getting married (i.e. shotgun marriages) are also amiss from existing forced marriage debates (Dahl and Moretti, 2008). Over-emphasis on racially minoritised women sees their plights as a cultural norm, resultantly dismissing similar occurrences in majority white communities as 'cultural anomaly' or a case of 'few bad apples' (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011: 362).

Dimensions of race and gender are implicated when instances of violence against racially minoritised women are singled out, inviting differential or racist treatment, and warranting an intersectional approach to understanding and addressing such issues. The literature notes racist police responses towards violence against racially minoritised women where such crimes are "more about culture than gender– thus removing the issue from the framework of violence against women and placing it in the debate on race", making racially minoritised communities "high risk" and "in need of special measures and control" (Siddiqui, 2005: 277). In negotiating the space between race and gender, South Asian feminist groups and movements have strongly advocated to integrate the debate on gendered violence in racially minoritised communities into mainstream debates on violence against women, domestic abuse, and human rights (Siddiqui, 2005: 275; Patel, 2003: 255; Gill and Anitha, 2011).

Conceptualisation of forced marriage has transcended from a cultural issue to domestic abuse, particularly to facilitate victim-centred approaches for inclusive and faster support, protection and prevention (Kazimirski et al., 2009; Reddy, 2014; Aujla and Gill, 2014). Kelly (2015: 114) highlights the various forms of violence that women and girls worldwide may face, including "sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault, trafficking, and intimate partner violence". Black feminist activists in the UK have resisted violence against women through campaigns such as opposing virginity testing (Bryan, Dadzie,

and Scafe, 1985: 172), establishing specialist refuges for racially minoritised women, supporting striking South Asian women workers (Wilson, 2010: 57), and addressing violence against women and children (Dustin and Phillips, 2008; Thiara and Gill, 2010). This extensive feminist activism reflects the focus on specific forms of violence experienced by South Asian women, such as forced marriage, and the need to integrate them into broader understandings of violence perpetrated against women and girls. Home Office also views forced marriage as a form of domestic abuse constituting:

> any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to, psychological; physical; sexual; financial; and emotional (Home Office, 2012).

The 2021 Domestic Abuse Act in the UK expanded the legal definition of domestic abuse to include not just intimate partner violence but also abuse by family members against individuals over 16 (Gangoli et al., 2023). This recognises forced marriage as a form of domestic abuse rooted in gender inequality and patriarchal control, emphasising the socio-cultural context within which it occurs (Gill and Aujla, 2014; Reddy, 2014). Segregating forced marriage from domestic abuse runs the risk of rendering all forms of violence against racially minoritised women as always being viewed through the lens of race, rather than patriarchal and gendered oppression (Siddiqui, 2005). There is documented evidence of violence against South Asian women in the UK being mislabelled as HBA due to such culturalist perspectives, even when no such 'honour' element is involved (Gangoli et al., 2023a; Dutt, 2024 forthcoming)

However, there are critiques to subsuming forced marriage within the wider domestic abuse framework. While an attempt has been made to contextualise 'family' in the government's definition, it is argued that the nature of coercion is heavily drawn from the context of intimate partner violence, when in fact, the dynamics of violence by family members have different manifestations (Westmarland and Kelly, 2014; Gangoli et al., 2023). Additionally, there is an assumption that forced marriage is a form of male violence against women, where men use tactics to exert control, instil fear, intimidate, and economically abuse and threaten women within intimate relationships (Hague and Malos, 2005). In this regard, it is argued that a.) female perpetrators of forced marriage go unchallenged (Sanghera, 2009; Aplin, 2017; Chantler and McCarry, 2020), and b.) the meaning of 'family members' predominantly takes into account only nuclear households. This limited view overlooks the significant role that extended family and community members, both in the UK and abroad, play in facilitating forced marriages, which are not adequately represented in the mainstream British understanding of

family (Gangoli et al., 2011: 35-36). Subsuming forced marriage within domestic abuse bypasses the multidimensional immediate socio-cultural and familial settings in which it occurs, and even "relies on an undifferentiated category of 'women' that assumes that to share female gender means a shared female experience" (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Mirza, 2015).

Concurrently, there is also a body of literature which sees forced marriage as distinct from other forms of domestic abuse because it constitutes collectivist and organised violence from families (Gill, 2021; Idriss, 2017). Thapar-Björkert (2007: 38) argues against "taking away the specificity of certain crimes by putting everything in the same [melting] pot". To this end, Idriss (2017) elucidates the *non-domestic nature* of forced marriage and HBA by associating it with community/gang-related violence, therefore rejecting the cultural and racial stigmatisation debates. Idriss's empirical research highlights how extended families and community members, even those far from the victim-survivors, can bypass 'trusting intimate relationships' to enforce corrective actions (ibid). Victim-survivors may be unaware of who in their network poses threat, intensifying their feelings of fear, intimidation, and control (Julios, 2015: 104-107; Idriss, 2017: 8). The discourse on race, culture and racism has been problematised by feminist black and minority women's movements, particularly regarding how to address the specific needs of racially minoritised women (Siddiqui, 2005; 2014; Day and Gill, 2020). The challenge lies in steering state and public attention to these unique needs without reinforcing racist narratives and isolating racially minoritised women from broader feminist concerns (Razack, 2004; Thiara and Gill, 2010; Gill, 2014).

## 2.10 Responses to Forced Marriage

Interventions addressing forced marriage in the UK have often been critiqued for adopting the culturalist lens discussed in the previous section. Particular racially minoritised communities, religions and cultures are simply 'tolerated' to appear 'culturally sensitive' and anti-racist (Patel, 2008: 13). Non-intervention and inaction are consequences of not meaning to intrude, which perpetuate and reinforce harmful conducive environments for racially minoritised women and children (Beckett and Macey, 2001; Meetoo and Mirza, 2010; Chantler et al., 2017). I now discuss formal state and policing responses to forced marriage which elucidate the historical and present-day context of responding to forced marriage.

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Historically, research has noted that due to the urge to be sensitive and avoid feelings of animosity from the racially minoritised community, intervention on forced marriage can be limited (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006: 8). Similarly, there is police concern over investigating abuse within racially minoritised communities due to fear of being labelled racist (Aplin, 2021; HMICFRS, 2022). Previous research has shown the problematic ways in which police officers can deflect and avoid cases of gender-based violence concerning racially minoritised communities, due to officer fears around cultural insensitivity (Belur, 2008: 430; Aplin, 2021). This nervousness around "coming across as racist" by statutory and voluntary practitioners is termed as 'race anxiety' (Chantler, Mirza and Mackenzie, 2022: 841) and underpinned by a wider lack of cultural competency in understanding the experiences of forced marriage and HBA (Aplin, 2021). Racially minoritised women experience gendered and racial oppression as their agency is curbed by 'race anxiety' which prioritise cultural norms over gender rights as the premise for non-intervention (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011: 357). Many women do not seek external help for fear of reinforcing racist stereotypes about their communities (as outlined in 2.9) (Batsleer et al., 2002). This is closely linked to racially minoritised women being acutely reluctant to call the police notwithstanding the gravity of their situations (Belur, 2008). Previous research highlights how police officers can deflect and avoid cases of gender-based violence concerning racially minoritised communities, due to officer fears around cultural insensitivity (Belur, 2008: 430; Aplin, 2021).

Contrastingly, in instances where police come in contact with HBA and forced marriage victims-survivors, there have been issues around victim anonymity and confidentiality (Sanghera, 2009). Idriss's (2017) research revealed a case where a white police official was keen to 'let the girls' parents know that she is safe' posing extreme safety risks. Therefore, historically, when young girls fled forced marriages, practitioners often treated them as runaway children and sent them back home, where they faced further violence (Patel, 1991; Siddiqui, 2003; Sanghera, 2009). At that time, policies showed a glaring lack of awareness regarding the dangers faced by victim-survivors of forced marriage, even when they came into contact with safeguarding officials (Anitha and Dhaliwal, 2019: 7). This aligns with earlier research that found child protection responses to forced marriage to be "less effective, less coordinated, and less clearly articulated" (Kazmirski et al., 2009: 6). The research pointed to Children's Services being hesitant to intervene in cases involving 16- and 17-year-olds. There was also uncertainty about whether Children's Services or the Police should take primary responsibility, along with a reluctance to apply child protection procedures for this age group. It underscores the importance of conducting thorough risk assessments, which may not necessarily involve legal orders

but could require various other service interventions (Kazmirski et al., 2009; Siddiqui, 2014; Gill and Gould, 2019; Monckton-Smith et al., 2022).

One of the UK's policy measures to address forced marriage was raising the sponsorship age for foreign spouses. Initially set at 18, the age was later increased to 21 in an attempt to reduce forced marriages. However, this policy has been criticised for its underlying anti-immigration implications, disproportionately affecting racially minoritised communities (Dustin and Phillips, 2008: 410). Research found no significant impact on forced marriage cases due to the age increase and highlighted the increased prevalence of immediate risks (Hester et al., 2007). Immediate risks (to both female sponsors and incoming spouses) include incarceration of young British girls, kept without passports, forcibly taken abroad and kept abroad till they attain the age of sponsorship (Gangoli and Chantler, 2009: 282-3), forced pregnancies to ensure marriage-related migration, and severe financial, sexual and physical violence after coming back to the UK. Longer-term risks constitute subsequent loss of agency in important matters of life (Sanghera, 2009), attempted self-harm and suicide, and serious forms of control and surveillance (Rauf et al., 2013).

Forced marriage literature has widely recorded accounts of victims-survivors who were forced into marriage to facilitate kinship extension into the UK, among a range of other factors, and to ultimately allow the other spouse entry into UK (Chantler et al., 2009; Bredal, 2011; Charsley et al., 2012; Qureshi, Charsley and Shaw, 2014; Mody, 2016). Not only this, but to also symbolically and materially better life opportunities through female British spouses' "passport of heaven" (Chantler et al., 2009: 606), implying the material gains of potentially acquiring British citizenship through marriage. There are serious implications if an individual refuses to act in accordance with responsibilities to the transnational kin, i.e. to refuse a spouse selected by immediate and extended family, which the increase in age of sponsorship measure neglected. Young girls and women are often subject to coercion and physical abuse to endorse a family visa application [3] ). In the past, the Visas and Immigration Office has exposed the identity of sponsors who chose not to proceed with sponsorship, putting them at greater risk of abuse, control, and community ostracism. This is because rejected applications for incoming spouses clearly indicate the absence of sponsorship proof by the UK national, thereby revealing their decision to withdraw support (Wilkins, 2018).

Forced marriage is a specific criminal offence in the UK under section s.121 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, 2014. Before 2014, individuals affected by forced marriage had the

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option to pursue criminal charges for related offenses such as kidnapping, false imprisonment, and rape (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016). Additionally, they could seek specific civil remedies through the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act of 2007, which included the possibility of obtaining a Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO) (Idriss, 2015). Violating an FMPO could lead to a prison sentence of up to two years (Julios, 2015). Although some have argued that legislation alone is insufficient to eliminate forced marriage (Gill, 2011; Julios, 2015), the then-Prime Minister David Cameron declared in 2012 that forced marriage would be criminalised in England and Wales. Cameron emphasised that criminalisation would serve as a clear message that forced marriage is both wrong and illegal, intending to deter potential offenders (Home Office, 2012; Siddiqui, 2014; Walker, 2018).

While this move to criminalise forced marriage was advocated for and since welcomed by many politicians and activists, it faces criticisms too. Armit Wilson (2014), for example, argues that it perpetuates an unjust emphasis on certain cultures as being particularly problematic. Furthermore, despite its symbolic function, it is widely argued that in reality criminal legislation offers little in the way of actual protection for victim-survivors (Sabbe et al, 2014). Hester et al. (2015: 12) examined forced marriage and HBA victim-survivors' experience of police reporting and found that a police visit makes matters public, thus bringing dishonour, cumulatively preventing women from even reporting, indicating their intensified hesitancies around proceeding with the criminal route. Victim-survivors often face the impossible choice of incriminating family members, leading to further dishonour and potential ostracism (Quek, 2013; Idriss, 2015). The public nature of criminal trials can exacerbate feelings of shame and make victim-survivors reluctant to come forward (Idriss, 2015). Additionally, the focus on prosecution rather than prevention and long-term support for victim-survivors raises questions about the true efficacy of this approach (Gill and Gould, 2019; Julios, 2015; Idriss, 2015).

Overall, while the criminalisation of forced marriage and the availability of civil remedies are important legal tools, they also present challenges. These include the potential for further victimisation, cultural sensitivity concerns, and the need for a more comprehensive approach that prioritises victim-survivor safety and long-term support over punitive measures alone. The ongoing debate underscores the need for a nuanced approach to forced marriage, balancing protection and prevention, understanding coercion and consent, and fostering trust between victim-survivors (Gill and Gould, 2019).

## 2.11 Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded in the concepts of intersectionality and coercive control, which assert the nuanced, process-based, and enduring nature of forced marriage in the lives of South Asian women. By integrating these frameworks, I contextualise the dynamics of forced marriage, revealing the persistent pressures and control that women endure throughout their experience. This integration is crucial to my research as it allows for a deeper exploration of how multiple layers of oppression—across gender, race, age, notions of 'honour' and shame, and citizenship status—intersect to shape the lived realities of these women. It provides a comprehensive lens to understand the cumulative impact of coercion and control, making it possible to uncover the complex power dynamics at play throughout women's whole lives that traditional frameworks often overlook.

## 2.11.1 Intersectionality

While universalising movements like feminism have been crucial in driving policy changes, such as advancing the violence against women agenda, they have often prioritised certain aspects, like gender, over others, overlooking those at the margins or "intersections" of difference (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). Feminism has been criticised for assuming a unified category of "woman" and their "collective victimhood", which neglects the diverse experiences shaped by race, class, and sexual orientation (Harris, 1990; Thiara and Gill, 2010b: 42). This essentialism, rooted in a Western cultural perspective, has often marginalised the needs of women from racially minoritised groups (Mohanty, 1991). In response, intersectional theory emerged as a necessary framework to better understand the lived experiences of traditionally marginalised individuals (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Intersectionality, a concept often attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), has its origins in Black feminist activism. Black feminists recognised the significance of gender as an identity marker but challenged its dominance, arguing that other aspects of identity, such as race and sexuality, are equally crucial (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Bolich, 2007; Nash, 2008: 2). They also emphasised how intersectionality and being attuned to "difference" have tangible consequences for oppressed individuals and groups, including victim-survivors of violence against women (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005: 43). Intersectional feminist scholarship focuses on understanding, exploring, and analysing the experiences of women who face overlapping forms of oppression related to race, gender, age, faith, sexuality, and other factors (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; The Combahee River Collective, 1995; Lorde,

1996). Analysing these women's experiences through the lens of a single category, such as gender, fails to capture the full depth or complexity of their lives. Crenshaw (1991) argues that these multiple axes of oppression are interlinked, co-constitutive and cannot be separated for analysis (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality maps multiple forms of difference to demonstrate how systems of privilege and oppression intersect, creating a complex "many-layered blanket of oppression" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 196). Unlike traditional identity politics, which often focus on single categories like gender or race, intersectionality examines oppression both within and across these categories (McCall, 2005). It challenges the idea that identity is fixed, and that oppression can be reduced to a single cause (Brah, 1996; Reynolds, 2010).

Intersectionality is particularly important for understanding the experiences of marginalised groups, such as women from racially minoritised communities, disabled women, and lesbian and bisexual women. Feminists of colour played a key role in developing intersectional theory, as they felt sidelined by a feminist movement that focused on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, neglecting the complexities of oppression faced by women from other marginalised communities (Kalev, 2004; Conaghan, 2009). Instead of viewing oppression as a straightforward additive model, where "racism plus sexism plus classism equals triple jeopardy" (King, 1997: 222), intersectionality recognises identity as both dynamic and contextual (Montoya and Agustín, 2013). Although intersectionality is often visualised as a 'map' of identity, positioning those at the margins—those who differ—at the intersection of various identity markers, this concept is more fluid than such imagery suggests (Walker, 2018: 83). While the map metaphor should not be entirely discarded, it should be seen as a mere "surface representation" that may overlook the "richer topography" of individual lives (Conaghan, 2009: 41). To this end, Yuval-Davis (2006: 204) emphasises the need to consider the varying power dynamics that different identity groups experience within specific historical contexts and the power relations within these groups. An intersectional lens thus highlights the ways in which women's identity is influenced by wider socio-cultural structures, conditions and factors around them including race, gender, age, culture, sexuality, family norms, 'honour', shame, obligation to kin, citizenship status, marital status, pressures around continuity of marriage, impact on children, and community perceptions.

Admittedly, intersectionality, as a complex and open-ended concept (Davis, 2008), does not offer a single, cohesive framework for research. However, in the context of this study, an intersectional approach allows for understanding how various forms of oppression intersect, revealing how multiple and multidimensional factors can marginalise and subjugate women. This research focuses on

examining the complex pressures and control women endure: the coercion to agree to a marriage they do not want, the forces that keep them trapped in that marriage, and the consequences they face when they finally leave. It looks at South Asian women's lives beyond single identity aspects, and beyond the single incident-based understanding of forced marriage, to explore the nature of coercion and control they face before, during and after the forced marriage. Using intersectionality, this thesis shows that women's experiences differ not only between but also within categories of women (Mirza, 2015: 5).

Like other researchers, such as Aisha Gill (2013: 143), I critique the universalising tendencies in some feminist literature and policy documents that treat culture as a fixed entity, grouping women from racially minoritised backgrounds into a single category with uniform needs. Feminist scholars (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005; Thiara and Gill, 2010a, 2010b; Anitha and Gill, 2011; Gill, 2013; Mirza, 2015) have employed intersectional theory to better understand racially minoritised women's multiple identities and varied experiences of abuse. Intersectionality challenges the mainstream views of violence and abuse experienced by South Asian women, where an overemphasis on singular identity traits can obscure the experiences of those who do not fit these moulds (Anitha, 2011; Gangoli et al., 2011: 35; Rew et al., 2013; Mirza, 2015; Sandhu, 2019). Society is shaped by multiple systems of domination, and individuals' experiences are not defined by a single identity, such as being a 'woman' or 'a racially minoritised woman' (Patel, 2003; Thiara and Gill, 2010, 2010a; Anitha and Gill, 2011). While there may be commonalities in these women's experiences of abuse based on gender, structural factors like race, faith, ideas about 'honour' and shame, immigration and citizenship status can render some women more vulnerable than others. Intersectionality offers valuable insights into how different social positions intersect to shape women's lives and experiences. Although there has been some intersectional analysis of South Asian women's experiences (Siddiqui, 2011; Smith and Marmo, 2011; Gill, 2014; Mirza, 2015; Gill and Anitha, 2023), it remains underdeveloped (Collins and Bilge, 2016). This thesis contributes to the expanding research that employs an intersectional approach. Importantly, intersectionality is not used to generalise experiences but to identify and analyse the specific social categories that emerge in the participants' experiences through an intersectional lens. This conceptual framework is applied to the experiences of forced marriage of South Asian women in this study.

Montoya and Agustín (2013) highlight that even when intersectional considerations are included in policy guidelines, differences are not always addressed in ways that truly serve the interests of the victim-survivors' the policies aim to protect. While recognising contextual differences in victim-

survivors' experiences is important, they argue that these differences are often overemphasised in exclusionary ways. Instead of fostering inclusivity, these approaches tend to reinforce a divide between the ethnic majority ('us') and minorities ('them'). In the context of violence against racially minoritised women, this can result in their urgent needs being overlooked (for example, Anitha, 2010; 2011; 2023) or their experiences being overly visible and framed as cultural pathologies (Montoya and Agustín, 2013: 5). Therefore, specific attention needs to be paid to how specific manifestations of violence and abuse faced by South Asian women are discussed in relation to one another, and how particular forms of violence are framed (Anitha and Gill, 2015; Walker, 2018: 85).

Nonetheless, intersectionality enables an exploration of South Asian women's specific experiences of forced marriage while acknowledging multiple facets of their identity. Factors like conformity to family interests, culture, socio-economic, immigration and citizenship status add unique dimensions to these experiences. This thesis does not merely highlight differences but analyses how these differences are created and sustained, affecting women throughout their life, contributing to the use of an intersectional approach. The multidimensional aspects of control and abuse experienced by South Asian women in the context of forced marriage underscore how we move beyond abstract understandings of pressure, duress and control by considering women's individual and lifelong circumstances.

## 2.11.2 Coercive Control

Anitha and Gill (2011: 55) highlight the 'total coercive burden' experienced by women to understand the specificity of their forced marriage, and to be alert to 'articulated and unarticulated constraints' within which individual autonomy and agency might be restricted. The concept of the 'total coercive burden' (Feinberg, 1986) encompasses explicit threats and implicit structural constraints shaped by 'honour', shame, family norms and traditions, obligations towards elders, gender, age, race, sexuality, and religion, highlighting the pervasive nature of control in the lives of South Asian women. These compounding experiences and the systemic constraints women face underscore the intense and sustained pressures or control they endure. This highlights the importance of using intersectionality and coercive control together to study the lifelong, multidimensional and ongoing control that shapes South Asian women's lives. I employ coercive control as a conceptual tool to contextualise 'the total coercive burden' discussed by Anitha and Gill (2011), and to trace its persistence even after the forced

marriage has occurred. This approach aligns with the authors' later work emphasising the need to understand the coercive control prevalent in South Asian women's lives when the "many different varieties and forms of pressures and abuse start to co-occur and persist throughout their lives" (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023: 46-47).

Evan Stark (2007: 229) describes coercion as the use of force or threats to enforce a specific response, while control involves structural forms of deprivation, exploitation and command that indirectly enforce compliance. When coercion and control occur together, he argues, they create a "condition of unfreedom" (205), which individuals experience as entrapment. Coercive and controlling violence involves a range of physical and non-physical tactics, predominantly used by men against women in intimate partner relationships (Stark, 2007; Dawson et al., 2019). This concept highlights the complex nature of oppression women continue to face, challenging the traditional view that intimate partner violence is solely defined by evidence of physical violence (Stark, 2007). Coercive control includes both coercion and control through force and/or deprivation, aiming to enforce the victim-survivor's compliance and ultimately stripping them of their freedom within the relationship—creating what Stark sees as entrapment (Stark & Hester, 2019). This form of violence is ongoing, with cumulative harm over time, making it impossible to reduce to a single incident (Stark, 2007; Katz, 2015). Coercive control can incorporate various economic, cultural, societal, and personal factors (Dutton & Goodman, 2005), all aimed at erasing the victim-survivor's sense of individuality and undermining their ability to make autonomous decisions (Arnold, 2009). Stark (2007) argues that this reflects a "liberty" crime against women, as they are effectively trapped in their personal lives. He also notes that these tactics seep into all domains of women's lives including economic, political, family, intimate and social spheres, impacting their life opportunities and social presence.

There are four primary domains of coercive controlling behaviours: controlling/proprietary actions, psychological abuse, sexual jealousy, and stalking (Dawson et al., 2019: 47). Perpetrators may employ both implicit and explicit threats, physical or sexual violence, destruction of the victim-survivor's personal belongings, and isolation or intimidation by closely monitoring the victim-survivor's behaviour and social interactions including who they interact with (Crossman & Hardesty, 2017; Hamberger et al., 2017). Arnold (2009) posits that the relationship between physical violence and coercive control exists on a continuum, ranging from specific incidents of violence to complete

domination over a partner. When physical violence is employed, it is often accompanied by other forms of abuse, including psychological, sexual, emotional, and financial, which are intended to isolate the victim-survivor and instil fear through surveillance, micromanagement, public humiliation or social ostracism (Stark, 2007; Arnold, 2009; Dawson et al., 2019). Men who employ these tactics frequently find that the mere threat of violence is sufficient to maintain control over their partner, without the need for actual physical violence (Dawson et al., 2019). Arnold (2009) also observed that abusers who rely on coercive control may be as violently reactive when their control is threatened as those who primarily use physical assault (1438).

Coercive control often extends into the economic sphere, manifesting through various restrictive behaviours such as limiting or denying access to transportation, household utilities like heat and water, and controlling food consumption. Perpetrators may force victim-survivors to beg for money, disconnect phone lines or damage cell phones, prevent them from attending work or school, or even send inappropriate messages or images to employers to get the victim-survivor dismissed from their job (Sharp-Jeffs, 2017, para. 4). In this vein, other coercive control tactics include making numerous calls to the victim-survivor in a single day, forbidding contact with male friends or family via social media, restricting access to personal travel documents and cell phones, and constantly demanding to know the victim-survivor's whereabouts (Dawson et al., 2019).


Coercive control has the potential to infiltrate every facet of a victim-survivor's life, affecting their daily routines, personal appearance, and health, as well as their relationships with family and friends. It can disrupt their ability to pursue work or education, limit access to financial resources, and even impact legal matters such as immigration status and child custody (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Hamberger et al., 2017). Victim-survivors often live in a perpetual state of fear, constantly adjusting their behaviour to placate their abuser (Wiener, 2017). This relentless manipulation leads victim-survivors to internalise the blame for the abuse they suffer, eroding their self-confidence and undermining their ability to make and assert decisions about their own and their children's lives (Wiener, 2017: 511), often resulting in a diminished 'space for action' (Kelly, Sharp and Klein, 2014). The authors emphasise the critical need for individuals experiencing ongoing coercive control to have opportunities for action and reflection, allowing them to understand the abuse they are enduring and contemplate alternatives to living under the coercive control regime.

In 2015, England and Wales criminalised coercive control under Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015. This legislation defines controlling or coercive behaviour within intimate or family relationships as an offense, recognising the insidious nature of such conduct. The Home Office's Statutory Guidance Framework has further elaborated on this by identifying other behaviours that can constitute coercive control. These include isolating a person from friends and family, depriving them of basic needs, monitoring their time and communications, controlling their daily activities, restricting access to support services, belittling them, and enforcing humiliating or degrading rules (Home Office, 2015: 3). This comprehensive list underscores the pervasive and multifaceted nature of coercive control, illustrating how it systematically erodes a victim-survivor's autonomy and well-being. By codifying coercive control into law, the Serious Crime Act 2015 provides a crucial tool for recognising and prosecuting the non-physical forms of abuse that often precede or accompany physical violence, offering greater protection to victim-survivors in intimate and family settings. I justify the use of coercive control as a conceptual framework because it emphasises a pattern of harm, constraints and entrapment against the victim-survivor in a repetitive and continuous way. Seeing forced marriage through the conceptual lens of coercive control improves focus on the reality of victim-survivors' experiences and puts into context the dynamics at play within mltiple relationships (Tuerkheimer, 2007). Thus, addressing the cumulative impact of coercive controlling behaviours on a daily basis (Walkgate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2019) at the intersection of race, gender, kinship relations, marriage norms, religion, citizenship status and conformity to family's ideas of 'honour' and shame, underscores the conceptualisation of this research.

Chantler and McCarry (2020) expand on Evan Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control, traditionally applied to intimate partner relationships (see Donovan and Hester, 2014 for coercive control in same-sex and LGBT relationships), by demonstrating its relevance to forced marriage. Stark's work has been instrumental in highlighting the subtle and pervasive ways abusive men control and limit the autonomy of women in intimate relationships. Chantler and McCarry (2020) argue that similar controlling behaviours, although executed by different perpetrators such as family members, are used to coerce women into forced marriages. However, there is a need to improve focus on how women might able be subjected to coercion and control after the forced marriage has occurred, thus signifying the use of coercive control in thus study. They suggest that forced marriage should be understood not as a singular event but as a continuous pattern of behaviour that deprives women of their autonomy while forcing them to conform to the will of their abusers (ibid). The authors' use of coercive control as a conceptual lens revealed that coercive control constitutes forced marriage as it often begins in a

woman's preteen years, subjecting her to years of trauma before the marriage is even contracted. They emphasise that even when women manage to evade the actual marriage ceremony, the trauma of being coerced remains significant. This underscores their argument that forced marriage should be conceptualised as an ongoing pattern and process of coercive behaviour, rather than a one-time occurrence.

Building on their work, this research uses the concept of coercive control to position South Asian women's cumulative experiences of control in the context of forced marriage. Little attention has been paid to South Asian women's experiences of coercive control, particularly at the hands of multiple perpetrators. Anitha (2011) argues that coercive control in forced marriages is complex, involving multiple layers of oppression rooted in gendered, racial, sexual and class-based inequalities. The ongoing control women face is part of a broader patriarchal structure that defines and limits their choices, making it vital to understand forced marriage as part of an ongoing pattern of coercive practices rather than a singular event.  By applying coercive control, this research develops the understanding of forced marriage as a prolonged process of coercion that extends beyond the point of entry into the marriage itself. It offers a unique perspective on the multidimensional nature of abuse that accompanies forced marriage. By focusing on the cumulative impact of control exerted through the multiple relationships that South Asian women might have in terms of natal family, marital family, and the wider community, this research uncovers the full spectrum of control that women endure, revealing how forced marriage exerts a profound and lasting influence throughout women's lives. The integration of coercive control not only deepens our understanding but also challenges conventional views around incident-specific understanding of forced marriage (see Gangoli et al., 2011; Chantler and McCarry, 2020), pushing for a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of forced marriage and its enduring consequences. It further strengthens the position that Stark's model of coercive control needs to become more inclusive of the multiple relationships and complex structures that characterise South Asian women's experiences.


## Summary

This chapter explores the complex issue of forced marriage, focusing on British South Asian women's experiences and situating it within broader frameworks of HBA, coercion, and gendered violence. It examines how forced marriage is defined, its intersection with cultural and legal frameworks, and the

various pressures—social, economic, and familial—that shape women's consent. A key theme in the literature is how forced marriage is distinct yet entangled with arranged marriage, with a 'grey area' where familial persuasion can become coercion. The chapter critiques the cultural framing of forced marriage in the UK, which often essentialises it as a 'South Asian problem' rather than recognising it as a form of domestic abuse with structural underpinnings. This critique is extended to the state's response, highlighting gaps in policy and law enforcement due to racial and cultural sensitivities.

The chapter explores 'honour' and shame as gendered constructs that regulate women's actions, underscoring how fears of Westernisation and perceived threats to family reputation drive coercion. It discusses the process of socialising South Asian women into marriage, limiting their agency through gendered expectations of duty and sacrifice. Coercion in forced marriage is conceptualised as a continuum, where women's choices are shaped by emotional, social, and economic constraints rather than outright physical force. Beyond the act of forced marriage, the chapter emphasises the ongoing abuse women face, including domestic violence, sexual coercion, and control from extended family. It critiques the dominant discourse that portrays leaving a forced marriage as the only 'right' choice, overlooking the complexities of women's decision-making within oppressive structures. Agency is examined not just in terms of resistance but also in women's negotiation of constraints, challenging Western feminist binaries of freedom versus oppression.

Finally, the literature review highlights policy responses, addressing both the advancements and the shortcomings in legal and social interventions. It critiques the over-reliance on culturalist explanations, which obscure the patriarchal dimensions of forced marriage and often lead to ineffective or racially biased interventions. Overall, this chapter situates forced marriage within a wider framework of gendered violence, coercion, and structural inequality, challenging simplistic narratives and advocating for an intersectional understanding of the issue.

# Chapter 3: Research Methodology

## Introduction

This chapter outlines the qualitative research design and data collection methods used, aligning with feminist research epistemology, and explains the rationale behind these choices. I describe the research sample, the sampling criteria, and the challenges faced in participant recruitment. I then justify the use of biographical narrative and semi-structured interviews, followed by a discussion of how I used these data collection methods for my research. The following section gives an in-depth description of the fieldwork; how participants were approached for the research with details and reflections of the interviewing process that took place. I then describe the tasks conducted after the fieldwork— transcribing, and justification of the use of thematic analysis. I later explain how ethical considerations were taken into account while doing this research. I then reflect on my own positionality as a South Asian female researcher within the research process. I also consider how Covid-19 impacted my research process. This chapter ends with an explanation of how I have organised my results, to provide a context for the subsequent findings and discussion chapter.

Below are the research questions for this project examining the lifelong nature of control within the complexity of women's experiences of forced marriage:

1.) What factors contribute to the coercive processes leading to forced marriages among British South Asian women, and how do these factors shape their pre-marital experiences?

2.) What is the nature of control experienced by women when they are in the forced marriage?

3.) How do women leave forced marriages, and how do they continue to experience control and coercion after leaving?

4.) How do practitioners perceive and address the issue of forced marriage, and what gaps/opportunities exist in their approaches to supporting victim-survivors?

## 3.1 Research Design

Qualitative research delves into how individuals perceive and interpret their world, focusing on the social dynamics that emerge from their interactions (Bryman, 2016). Its goal is to amplify the voices and experiences of the participants. Skinner, Hester, and Malos (2005) highlight that feminist research

should adopt methods that best capture women's experiences. Researchers have pointed out that one's beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology) shape their theories of knowledge (epistemology), which then determine the suitable methods for conducting research (Holden and Lynch, 2004; Blaikie, 2007). This interconnectedness ensures that the research approach aligns with the lived experiences and perspectives of those being studied. Human action and social interaction underpinned by distinctive social, cultural and life contexts generate what human beings perceive as 'facts' (Ackerly and True, 2010). Both *knowers* and *knowledge* can be harmed due to dominant epistemic frameworks, and assumptions about the suitable content that encompasses feminist knowledge, leading to some individuals not being heard and their experiences overlooked (Hutchings, 2023). This research design is extensively informed by feminist methodologies as it platforms the 'truths' of disempowered sections in society which has been overlooked in pursuit of 'universalised truths'. Feminist scholars contend that there is no single feminist methodology, espousing instead for varied approaches shaped by particular theoretical, political and ethical concerns (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). This diversity is seen as promoting reflexivity and critical examination of the research process amidst differing views on justice, power and relationships (Mirza, 2015: 10).

The feminist consciousness of this research lies in embracing the idea that the 'personal is political' mainly because women's lived experience of violence and abuse is situated in broader social, cultural and political frameworks (Stanley and Wise, 2002). Racially minoritised women's experiences of oppression and gender inequality intersect with strictly gendered family norms around 'honour', shame, conformity, compliance, complex kinship and intergenerational relationships, factors like citizenship, community, culture, religion, sexuality and ongoing experience of abuse (Anitha and Gill, 2009; Mirza, 2017). This research is feminist in its treatment of women as sources of knowledge (Letherby, 2011) and producing knowledge which will directly and positively affect their lives. I adopted a broad methodological and ethical framework for conducting this research aimed at reflecting women's lived experiences (Westmarland and Bows, 2018). The ontological position concerns how women perceive their realities shaped by their social, historical, and cultural contexts (Stanley and Wise, 1993). My feminist epistemological stance emphasises the importance of reconstructing South Asian women's lived experiences through their own voices. According to Skinner (2005), ensuring that women's voices are heard requires a democratic research process. Feminist epistemology elevates the voices of racially minoritised women by recognising them as "agents of knowledge", validating their perspectives through in-depth analysis (Collins, 2015: 2350). South Asian women's experiences, intersecting race and gender (Gill, 2004; Siddiqui, 2016), highlight the importance of intersectionality,

acknowledging the multiple social locations they occupy (Crenshaw, 1991; The Combahee River Collective, 1995). This perspective, combined with feminist epistemology, supports a qualitative approach to explore and understand the experiences and voices of South Asian women. Feminists have recognised the need to address and mitigate the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched to reduce power imbalances (McCarry, 2005). These three core aspects of social research—amplifying the voices of participants, maintaining an equitable relationship between the researcher and participants, and balancing power—became crucial for my research. Such research necessitates a sensitive and non-hierarchical approach to ensure integrity and authenticity of the participants' experiences (Sandhu, 2019: 71).

While quantitative methods can reveal the extent of a social problem (Sampson et al., 2008), this research adopts a qualitative approach to align with its goals and feminist commitments. Qualitative methods were chosen to provide a safe space for victim-survivors of abuse to share their stories at their own pace, and to explore their meaning-making during interviews, which quantitative methods could not achieve. Moreover, it has been argued that women from racially minoritised communities are not well represented in quantitative samples owing to their inability to speak English, understand the nature or purpose of surveys/questionnaires and inability to participate due to proximity with perpetrators (Mirza, 2015: 16). I focused on asking 'what,' 'why,' and 'how' questions to facilitate victim-survivors make sense of their experiences (Blaikie, 2010: 90) and decided that assessing the overall extent of forced marriage cases in the UK was beyond the scope of this research. I avoided traditional quantitative methods to gather in-depth data and to address power disparities, allowing participants more control over the questions asked. Therefore, my underlying rationale to not use quantitative methods was to do research for and with women and not 'to women'.

Given the hidden nature of forced marriage, the Home Office claiming its numbers to be 'the tip of the iceberg', its conflation with arranged marriages and there being more than one way of being forced into a marriage (see Chapter 2), the research's focus on victim-survivors' lived experiences, wider South Asian community's perceptions about forced marriage and practitioners' response to it warranted using qualitative tools. Qualitative research focuses on words and narratives (Bryman, 2016). This research aims to amplify South Asian women's voices by analysing their stories about being forced into a marriage, living in that marriage, and leaving that marriage, particularly when facing violence throughout this experience. Through qualitative methods, South Asian women are recognised as knowledgeable agents, allowing for a deeper understanding of their agency within the context of their social norms and positions, such as gender, age, racial identity and citizenship and marital status.

## 3.2 The Research Sample

To answer the research questions, it was important to get multiple people's voices in my research. Therefore, I set out to interview not only victim-survivors of forced marriage and practitioners but also people from the South Asian community more broadly. South Asian community is one of the largest ethnic minority groups in the UK (Indian: 2.5%; Pakistani: 2.0%; Bangladeshi: 1.0%) (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Due to the limited timeframe of the PhD project, I decided to seek what I am familiar with, in the form of languages from the South Asian subcontinent I can speak (i.e. Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi), culture, tradition and rituals, and hence specifically sought out Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi communities in the UK. While selecting the South Asian community in the UK as a focus could risk further stigmatisation for practicing forced marriage, this research addresses the issue carefully. By offering detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of South Asian women, this study aims to enhance understanding of the complex patterns and contexts in which forced marriage occurs, rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes.

## 3.2.1 Sample 1: Victim-survivors of forced marriage

The criteria for interviewing victim-survivors were that they had to be from a Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi background/community and living in the UK, be above 18 years and below 61 years of age, had experienced a forced marriage or felt at-risk of a marriage they did not want. During familiarisation calls, I ensured that victim-survivors were not currently experiencing forced marriage so as to mitigate emotional trauma and for them to be able to articulate in a reflective manner. The period of time since their experience of forced marriage used was three years, i.e., victim-survivors had experienced or got out of a forced marriage at least three years ago. I used a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling to speak to a wide range of participants in this sample (Bryman, 2016). Based on the interest and interview experience of victim-survivors, I later encouraged them to spread a word among other victim-survivors they might know of through their social network. In total, I interviewed six victim-survivors. Since I conducted biographical narrative interviews and interviewed one victim-survivor twice over a span of four weeks, I did 12 interviews in the victim-survivor sample. The table below provides a background to the victim-survivors, but a narrative description of their profiles can be found in Appendix 1:

| Name | Gender | Age | Sexuality | Ethnicity | Country of Birth/ Immigration info | Religion | Time since experience of forced marriage | Interview year |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aliyah | Female | Late 30s | Heterosexual | British Bangladeshi | UK/ First generation British | Islam/ Muslim | 8 years | 2021 |
| Sharmin | Female | Late 30s | Heterosexual | British Bangladeshi | UK/ First generation British | Islam/ Muslim | First forced marriage: 19 years<br><br>Second forced marriage: 9 years | 2021 |
| Mehreen | Female | Early 20s | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | UK/ Second generation British | Islam/ Muslim | 4 years | 2021 |
| Ghazala | Female | Early 50s | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | UK/ First generation British | Islam/ Muslim | 16 years | 2021 |
| Roop | Female | Late 40s | Heterosexual | British Indian | UK/ First generation British | Hindu/ Punjabi | 9 years | 2021 |
| Harnoor | Female | Late 40s | Heterosexual | British Indian | UK/ First generation British | Sikh | 29 years | 2021 |

*Table 1: List of victim-survivors- Sample 1*

**More Demographic Context to the Victim-Survivors:**

The victim-survivors came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, though a common theme was family control over economic resources. Some, like Aliyah, started earning at a young age and had to financially support their families. Barring Aliyah, most had their education thwarted—experiencing school dropouts, being denied further education, or being prevented from pursuing jobs they wanted. For instance, one participant, Ghazala, was prohibited from going to university and seeking employment. Others, like Mehreen, had access to some degree of education but were socially discouraged from prioritising a career over marriage.

The victim-survivors primarily grew up in extended or joint family households, where multiple generations lived together. These structures reinforced intergenerational control, with not only parents but also grandparents, uncles, and aunts exerting authority over marital decisions. Participants noted that collective decision-making about marriage left them with little room for individual choice. Mehreen, for instance, recounted how uncles and male cousins played a decisive role in reinforcing family expectations around marriage.

**Reflections**: Except for Mehreen, who escaped just before her forced marriage, the other victim-survivors—Aliyah, Sharmin, Ghazala, Roop, and Harnoor—endured their forced marriages for extended periods before eventually leaving. These women were forced into marriages at a time when the issue received little policy attention and before the criminalisation of forced marriage (Chantler et al., 2001). It is important to recognise that the policies and guidelines surrounding forced marriage were very different 15 to 20 years ago, or even earlier, when these women faced abuse during their childhoods (Batsleer et al., 2002; Izzidien, 2008). This context is crucial for understanding the help-seeking responses explored in Chapter 7, as some of these women came in contact with social services and other statutory organisations 15-20 years ago, sometimes even before their forced marriages had even occurred (see Table 4 in Chapter 7 for more on the context of this timeframe). At that time, forced marriage was not widely recognised as a form of violence against women or as an issue requiring broader attention (Siddiqui, 2005; Chantler et al., 2001; Chantler, 2012).


### 3.2.2. Sample 2: Wider members from the South Asian community in the UK

I approached members of the British South Asian community with the criteria of them being from Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds/communities and living in the UK, aged 18-65. I included a diverse range of individuals—parents, grandparents, and younger people—to explore their views on

marriages and their involvement in them, whether arranged, love or forced. With this sample, I aimed to understand their perspectives on marriage, family roles, and knowledge of forced marriage. The purpose with this sample was to know how they or people close to them got married, how their families participated in their marriage, how they envisaged their marriage, and what they knew about forced marriage. This sample included men and women who were single, married and divorced. Additionally, it consisted of British Pakistani participants and predominantly female community members, which introduces some bias. Despite this, the research benefits from a crossover between this wider sample and victim-survivors, highlighting the varied experiences of pressure and socialisation in British South Asian communities. By examining these similarities, this research illuminates the multifaceted nature of these socio-cultural and family dynamics across different sets of individuals and contexts within the South Asian community. In total I interviewed six individuals from this sample, whose backgrounds are detailed in the table below.

| Name | Gender | Age | Sexuality | Ethnicity | Religion | Marital Status | Interview Year |
|------|--------|-----|-----------|-----------|----------|----------------|----------------|
| Zoya | Female | 38 | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | Islam/Muslim | Married | 2021 |
| Nupur | Female | 32 | Heterosexual | British Indian | Hindu | Married | 2021 |
| Hamza | Male | 30 | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | Islam/Muslim | Unmarried | 2020 |
| Nazma | Female | 60 | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | Islam/Muslim | Married | 2021 |
| Imran | Male | 64 | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | Islam/Muslim | Married | 2021 |
| | | | | | | | |

| Nisa | Female | 40 | Heterosexual | British Pakistani | Islam/Muslim | Unmarried | 2021 |
|------|--------|----|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------|------|

*Table 2: List of wider South Asian community members- Sample 2*

**Reflections**: This sample frequently appears in Chapter 4 and is contrasted with the victim-survivor sample to underscore the distinct differences between the two. The key distinction lies in the extent to which parents in the community sample enforce punishment to ensure conformity, and their relatively limited reliance on community norms as a regulatory force. It is crucial to examine how, at various stages in the lifelong process of control, the community sample diverges from abusive or coercive practices, showing a clear boundary between discipline and abuse, marking the difference between the victim-survivor and the community sample, thus signifying the importance of including broader perspectives.

### 3.2.3 Sample 3: Practitioners

Practitioners were recruited with the criteria of them having experience in supporting and safeguarding forced marriage victim-survivors, working with them, or coming in contact with them at any point in their service provision. These included police officials, or frontline workers at specialist organisations supporting racially minoritised victim-survivors of gender-based violence, or domestic abuse coordinators at local council. In total, I conducted interviews with seven practitioners. A mix of purposive and snowballing techniques were used to recruit this sample. Pseudonyms have not been allocated to individuals in this sample as their quotations are attributed to the professional support sector they represent. However, I do acknowledge certain aspects of their identity as they are important in my analysis, particularly their ethnicity and gender to better understand practitioners' understandings of racially minoritised women's experiences. Hence, considerations like, if a white British practitioner responded to a case of forced marriage within the South Asian community, would their response be different than a South Asian practitioner, become important. This was an area of interest when approaching the practitioner sample. The table below provides a background of individuals in this sample in relation to the formal support sector they came from, and their gender and racialised identity.

| | Professional sector of the practitioners/ Job Post | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | Number of years in their role/service | Interview Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Practitioner 1 | Local Council/ Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator | Female | White British | 16 | 2021 |
| Practitioner 2 | Domestic abuse charity/ Refuge Staff | Female | White British | 10 | 2021 |
| Practitioner 3 | LGBTQ+ domestic abuse and HBA charity/ frontline staff member | Male | White British | 10 | 2021 |
| Practitioner 4 | 'By and for' specialist domestic abuse consultancy/ frontline staff member | Female | British Indian | 18 | 2021 |
| Practitioner 5 | Police officer | Female | White British | 15 | 2021 |
| Practitioner 6 | Police officer | Female | British Indian | 18 | 2021 |
| Practitioner 7 | Police officer | Male | White British | 10 | 2021 |

*Table 3: List of individuals in the Practitioner Sample- Sample 3*

**Reflections**: The practitioners I interviewed demonstrated a good and often nuanced understanding of forced marriage, as explored in Chapter 7. Their knowledge underscores the significant evolution of practice and policy surrounding forced marriage, highlighting a stark contrast with the help-seeking experiences of victim-survivors from over 20 years ago. Awareness of forced marriage and the associated controlling behaviours has notably increased (Chantler and McCarry, 2020), and this was evident in the insights shared by practitioners in this study. It is important to note that for some practitioners, such as the 'by and for' specialist consultant, forced marriage and HBA were central to their roles, while for others, it was just one aspect of their broader safeguarding responsibilities. Police officers, for instance, often dealt with forced marriage alongside safeguarding sex trafficking victim-survivors and addressing severe domestic abuse cases, making responding to forced marriage as one part of their overall duties.

In total, I interviewed six victim-survivors, six members from the general British South Asian community, seven practitioners involved in supporting victim-survivors of forced marriage. Although I would have liked to access more victim-survivors, the sample in the end was workable enough considering the deadlines I set to recruitment, my overall research timeline, availability of the participants, and the impact of Covid-19 throughout my research. A smaller sample also generated richer data from each interview lasting between 1-2 hours. With each survivor, I gathered 3-4 hours of data in total, so even though the number of victim-survivors I spoke to is small, there is a greater appreciation of South Asian women's experiences. The victim-survivors included in my sample were of different ages, had different experiences of being forced into a marriage, conceptualised forced marriage and 'force' differently, had different perpetrators, had different relationships with their families, experienced a range of other forms of abuse in their individual lives compounding their experience of forced marriage, received different forms of support and looked at life in different ways.

Sometimes, unmarried women in the general South Asian community sample disclosed instances relating to pressures to marry according to parents' wishes, victim-survivors spoke about everything—from their upbringing, their parents, how the forced marriage took place and abuse that followed, and the process of leaving that marriage. Even men in the general South Asian community spoke about how they knew of women in their families who were subjected to pressures to marry, and their thoughts about their own and their children's marriage. A positive attribute of this research is that the overall sample allowed me to identify and interweave similar themes emerging from victim-survivors, men and women in the general South Asian community sample, and practitioners.

## 3.3 The Research Field

The following sub-sections outline the recruitment strategy for the samples identified above. I discuss the broader topic of accessing participants and the enabling and challenging factors along the way. I situate the role of gatekeepers in recruitment, access and facilitating participation of the victim-survivors in my research. I also reflect on my initially identified gatekeepers, what worked and what did not work with them, and how I negotiated access with other gatekeepers. These sub-sections give an insight to how I accessed victim-survivors and my own reflections in the initial phase of recruitment. I also present some limitations to the sample recruited.

### 3.3.1 Recruitment: Challenges to Access and Experience with Gatekeepers

After receiving ethical approval, I reached out to specialist organisations supporting racially minoritised victim-survivors of forced marriage via email. Some responded, stating they could not support research requests at that time, while others did not reply (Appendix 2). Building relationships with gatekeepers is crucial for gaining access, but the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns prevented me from interacting with or volunteering at these organisations, thus hindering relationship-building. During the pandemic, the gender-based violence sector focused on immediate support for victimised individuals, hence access to key practitioners and victim-survivors was lower than usual. Additionally, my outsider status as an international PhD student may have led to scepticism about my credentials or expertise, affecting participation decisions.

Eide and Allen (2005) see gatekeepers as important mediators whose involvement in the recruitment strategy has implications for participation of minority groups in particular. Like Chaitali Das in her exploration of British-Indian adult children's perspectives on parental divorce (McAreavey and Das, 2013: 117), I identified members within British Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities who had a strong community presence. These individuals could either be connected to potential participants for my study or serve as gatekeepers to spread the word about my research to potential participants. This methodological conceptualisation of gatekeepers included frontline workers, police officers and organisations directly supporting racially minoritised victims of domestic abuse and forced marriage; South Asian community members in the UK having links to more South Asians. Therefore, I

broadened my recruitment strategy after making little progress with mainstream NGOs and voluntary organisations.

Barratt et al. (2015) have employed social media to reach 'hidden populations'. Given the sensitive nature of the research and the potential trauma that South Asian women might experience, this group of participants is likely to have low social visibility (Sandhu, 2018: 79). Exploring the use of Twitter appeared to be a valuable approach for recruiting participants. Sometimes, I was contacted by victim-survivors via twitter direct messaging, following which we exchanged numbers and arranged familiarisation calls (Appendix 3). I recruited two victim-survivors via Twitter.

Another way I got in touch with some victim-survivors and key practitioners was through attending webinars held over Zoom by specialist organisations during Covid-19. People with lived experience of domestic abuse were speakers on these webinars and I identified the ones who had experienced domestic abuse within a forced marriage. I then sent them separate emails to see if they were interested in talking about their lived experiences at length (Appendix 4). I also shared details about my research in the chat function of such webinars and sometimes participants contacted me in this way. Additionally, I asked the practitioners I interviewed to direct me to victim-survivors they had supported in the past. This worked out well because the snowballing effect not only helped me in recruiting three victim-survivors, but also other key practitioners suggested by the practitioners I interviewed first.

Snowballing also worked within the victim-survivor sample as sometimes they knew of other women who had experienced forced marriage. After the interview, I would ask them to spread a word about my research and they would get back to me a few days later with phone numbers of women to contact. These women had previously been given a brief summary of my research by the participants themselves, so the point of contact was relatively easier. Sometimes e-introductions were also done. In an attempt to gain access to more victim-survivors and general South Asian community members, I was also invited to a community radio show in the North-East of England by a victim-survivor who had links to a local radio channel there. This was an opportunity for me to speak to listeners, tell them about my research and myself, how I will maintain confidentiality and how they could get in touch with me. I was also approached by police forces in the South of England (whom I met in preventing domestic abuse webinars during Covid-19) to be a guest speaker on their Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage working groups. Snowballing within police groups helped me recruit two police officials.

Gatekeepers also understand what they are asked to do in their own social context which determines the way they grant access and the way they cooperate (Wanat, 2008). In this study, some gatekeepers were happy to give access in the broad sense by spreading a word about my research. This included exchanging numbers and e-introductions with victim-survivors, explaining the research to other practitioners for practitioner interviews and even double- checking with me if I had heard from the people they put me in touch with.  For example, a South Asian police official introduced me to Mehreen, a forced marriage victim-survivor, but despite multiple attempts, the official could not participate in an interview due to urgent police work. Although the official's availability was limited, they facilitated my access to Mehreen and were otherwise supportive.

Another practitioner facilitated my access to Roop and a practitioner from an LGBTQ+ domestic abuse charity, circulated my research request within her network, and helped connect me with the previously mentioned police official. Her ongoing support and extensive network proved invaluable to my research, demonstrating that professionals can assist even those less known in academic or feminist circles. Out of the 7 practitioners I interviewed, 2 of them were from the British South Asian community themselves, including this practitioner, and that might be associated with her willingness to support me. The police official who introduced me to Mehreen was from a racially minoritised background, which indeed denotes trust and rapport between researchers and gatekeepers from racially minoritised communities and the relational insider status of the researcher. As a racially minoritised woman undertaking this research, I used the same research language with white British practitioners asking them too to support with recruitment, and one of them also helped in arranging an interview with another practitioner. Historical, cultural and linguistic similarities with some practitioners might positively influence the process of gatekeeping and recruitment in general, however, this should not pull focus from the efforts of early career researchers at relationship-building with all possible gatekeepers. Research underpinned by good ethical motives can also warrant participation and gatekeepers' support with recruitment (Miller and Bell, 2002: 56).

Sometimes, gatekeepers also relay or reflect the ethical concerns of participants (Sanghera and Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008). At the start of my recruitment strategy, I was keen to also interview male victim-survivors of forced marriage to overcome the potential bias of my female-only victim-survivor sample. A male gatekeeper from an organisation supporting male victim-survivors connected me with a potential participant. After sharing the information sheet and consent form with him, I double-checked with the male victim-survivor whether he was still interested to be interviewed. The gatekeeper then got in touch after a week's time informing me of the mental health issues affecting

the male victim-survivor due to which he could not participate in the research. This gatekeeper, who was also responsible for providing regular counselling to the male victim-survivor had evaluated his ability to participate but did not anticipate the mental health concerns that might arise later. Whilst speaking to both the male gatekeeper and the male victim-survivor, I felt what Van Maanen's (1998: 144) describes a 'constant push and pull between fieldworker and informant' in relation to gaining access. When I did not hear back from the male victim-survivor for over a week after sharing the information sheet, I informed the gatekeeper out of a responsibility to make sure the male victim-survivor was okay. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) assert that researchers' situated responses to issues during the research process determine how ethics is done in practice. The gatekeeper checked in on him and relayed the male victim-survivor's triggered anxiety and overwhelming thoughts.  I still wanted to make sure that I did not upset him so attempted to make it clear that it is okay if he did not wish to participate. This was a relational space that as a researcher, I navigated alone, with integrity, comprised of various responsibilities towards participants' safety and deliberations with my supervisors (Banks et al., 2013). While a female researcher interviewing a male survivor presents its own dynamics and challenges (Idriss, 2017), I could not explore them as this male victim-survivor withdrew from the research. However, his mental health issues were the primary concern for withdrawing and not much can be said about how he felt about being interviewed by a female researcher.

One victim-survivor in particular, Aliyah, helped me in speaking to other women (married and unmarried) who were willing to speak about their experience of getting married. I used snowballing here too and asked to be put in touch with more of their friends who would be interested in speaking about how marriages happen in their communities. My data collection lasted from January 2021 to February 2022. I settled on this timeline in consultation with my supervisors, my own studentship funding deadlines and also the rich data I got from my workable samples. During data collection, I simultaneously recruited for some 'missed voices': migrant South Asian women, British South Asians with learning disabilities and LGBTQ+ South Asians. I got in touch again with the practitioners I had previously interviewed and requested them to introduce me to organisations who could support me in speaking to British South Asians from the LGBTQ+ community. A familiarisation call with frontline staff from such an organisation was arranged during which I made a case for capturing the voices of LGBTQ+ South Asians, and then an interview with them was scheduled.

### 3.3.2 Sample Limitations

While this is extensive research comprising of a range of participants, there are a few limitations. Firstly, I aimed to interview male victims of forced marriage due to emerging research in this area. However, limited support and their hesitancies to share their experiences made access challenging (Idriss, 2019). This difficulty mirrors the findings of Samad and Eades (2002) and subsequent studies, reflecting ongoing challenges in recruiting male participants. Another drawback also includes absence of migrant South Asian women and South Asian women with no recourse to public funds (unsettled immigration status). This research does not include the experiences of lesbian women as all victim-survivors identified as heterosexual. Experiences of British South Asians from the LGBTQ+ community or those with learning disabilities are also missing from the sample. These groups are vital to forced marriage research due to the unique complexities they face. However, accessing these populations poses significant challenges, particularly in sensitive areas like sexuality and domestic abuse, where existing research is limited (see Jaspal, 2014). It's important to note that describing these communities as "difficult to access" does not imply that the issue lies with the communities themselves, but rather that researchers and support services often lack the necessary avenues to reach the most marginalised individuals. The South Asian community sample could have been enhanced with more interviews from Indian and Bangladeshi participants and religious leaders. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing visits to religious places, I could not establish rapport or circulate research information effectively. Given the three-year funding timeline and recruitment challenges, the existing sample was deemed to be sufficiently rich and diverse.

## 3.4 Data Collection

### 3.4.1 Biographical Narrative Interviews with victim-survivors of forced marriage

Previous research has conducted in-depth interviews with victim-survivors of forced marriage to understand the 'why' and 'how' of it. My approach contextualises not only their lived experience (in that I also wanted to study the 'why' and 'how') but also how they made sense of their experience in hindsight and at present, how they reflect on their actions and of others, and how they look at life now. Through a narrative approach, I wanted to provide my participants with an un-interruptive and un-intrusive platform to tell their story in their own words. I prioritised the importance of enabling a

story or life experience being told. The reason I do this is to 'position the peculiarity of individual experience in unique historical and societal locations and processes, for example, families' (Wengraf, 2004: 1). Narrative research allows for the 'participant's subjective consciousness, emphasising the role of meanings, reflexive knowledge, and words ("voice") in shaping one's own experience' (Suárez-Ortega, 2012: 190). There is a strong sense of honouring their voice where they express themselves in the most authentic form which establishes them as the 'interpreting and acting' subject signifying the way they interpret events and lived their lives. Narratives, according to Somers (1994) are the means through which individuals interpret themselves, by telling stories which construct racialised and gendered subjects.

The representational aspects of narrative and narrativity enable us in making sense of our social world and our constituting social identity- 'all of us come to be who we are…by being located or locating ourselves in social narratives rarely of our own making' (Somers, 1994: 606). Wengraf (2004: 6) uses the concept of 'systems of relevancy' to highlight the unique aspects of individuals' stories, such as religious beliefs, upbringing, and cultural norms. These systems provide context for their experiences, encompassing both personal and broader economic, political, social, and cultural factors (Suárez-Ortega, 2012: 192). Narrative methods also allow individuals to articulate counter-narratives which go against structural narratives, rendering individuals as both agents and subjects— which contributes to the uniqueness of situating ourselves and our identities in a social world (Valentine and Sadgrove, 2014: 1982).

I chose narrative interviews over chronological interviews because the context and purpose of the interview was already explained to the participants, making sequencing of life events much less important than the selected experience of forced marriage and its biographical significance (Harding, 2006). Biographical narrative interviewing places more importance on how individuals look back to their lives and how they choose to put it into words, what they emphasise and what they leave out. These interviews focused on victim-survivors' family backgrounds, feelings around how they got married, how their marriage was, the process of leaving that marriage, and their relationship with their families both in childhood and adulthood (Appendix 2). The aim was to capture the women's personal narratives, highlighting the significance they attributed to key events, situations, family reactions, and their relationship with their parents and husbands. Biographical interviewing methods enable participants to contextualise their historical actions, simultaneously giving a glimpse of how meanings are constructed and underpin actions in everyday lives (Chamberlayne, et al., 2000). These spoken autobiographies and narratives of personal experience include conscious and subconscious selections

of emotional and material feelings, dilemmas, concerns and emphases —all a part of their lived, experienced and constantly interpreted reality (Wilcock and Quaid, 2018).

Narrative interviews can be an emancipatory process facilitating subjective changes within research participants "who are then able to acknowledge and respond to ambiguous subjectivities by effectively refusing fixed and static categories of sameness or otherness" (Ellsworth and Miller, 1996 quoted in Wolgemuth and Donohue, 2006: 1026). This directly aligns with how Judith Butler (1990) encourages agency to be generated by a.) re-exploring the self and one's identity as 'performative' and b.) challenging heteronormative kinds of performances to re-establish new modes of being. It became quite important to demonstrate the transformative nature of biographic narrative inquiry for my research especially since each victim-survivor perceived and showed agency in different ways.  For example, victim-survivors had a strong sense of resistance to coercive control if abusive or controlling personalities come their way at present or in future. Ghazala summarised it as:

> Of course, now, I would not let anyone do this to me and I am much better at seeing the signs. (Ghazala)

I used the narrative inquiry to not treat this as merely additional data or by-product of my research, but instead to illustrate how simply the act of telling and retelling their stories facilitated explanatory power and control revealing their acknowledgement of their life's bittersweet ambiguities. Boler (1999: 197 quoted in Wolgemuth and Donohue, 2006: 1030) ascertains that an ambiguous self is representative of a breathing space which allows us to revisit 'old and familiar' and at times uncomfortable spaces and initiate an internal process of inquiry with a strong reference to our present. For example, Sharmin reflects on the emancipatory nature of accessing memories and storytelling of difficult life events in the following quotation during the interview:

> Now, I use my past as a reference book to see how far I have come along. (Sharmin)

## 3.4.2 Methodological Reflections from Doing Biographical Narrative Interviews

Biographical narrative interviews are conducted in multiple sessions, starting with a single question to prompt detailed storytelling (Wengraf, 2011: 113). The interviewer facilitates the storytelling without interruptions in the first session. Before starting, I informed victim-survivors that I would conduct two interviews over 3-4 weeks, with the first being a listening session with minimal interruption. I posed

my initial narrative inducing question by asking victim-survivors to tell me their life story— all the events and experiences which were important for them. In the second session, I followed up on specific aspects of their lives, including childhood, family norms, relationships with parents and husbands, and circumstances leading up to their forced marriage. I therefore conducted two one-on-one biographical interviews with each of the 6 victim-survivors. This approach allowed them to tell their stories freely according to their conscious and subconscious choices, without being constrained by a fixed start or stop point (Wengraf, 2001: 113), and reflect between the sessions.

I noticed that the initial narrative inducing question got the ball rolling and almost all participants told their experiences chronologically, for at least 20-30 minutes. While some victim-survivors ended their narration with '*And that's it, that is my story'*, some victim-survivors used silences to denote that they were finished. Wengraf (2001, 2004) maintains that researchers should make notes of the keywords used by participants, ask only narrative-pointed questions and strictly warns against paraphrasing. I felt a strong sense of responsibility towards the participants, especially given the emotional distress they often experienced while sharing. As a result, it was challenging for me to immediately ask further narrative-focused questions. I employed a strategy of empathetic and active listening, using the participants' own keywords to pose further questions. By mirroring their language and expressing understanding, such as saying, "I can see you feel strongly about this," I encouraged them to reflect more on related events. For instance, after Ghazala's 40-minute account of being in a forced and abusive marriage, I ended by mirroring her experience in her words by using sentences like "*You mentioned that your ex-husband at that time was …..*" which led her to immediately say:

> And you know what, when I had finally managed to buy a car, he used to check the mileage of the car after I used to return and say to me that my work is not these many miles away so where all did you go. (Ghazala)

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, many participants, in the act of telling their experiences, also nearly and sometimes fully broke down. But when they paused because of breaking down, they did not speak— not in a manner of not telling their story further but in a manner of recollecting themselves to be able to go on. Pausing to release their emotions was their own way of real-time coping while real-time recalling their experiences. One victim-survivor also mentioned that it was cathartic to share her life experience and acknowledged breaking down as a natural emotion. I also noticed that silences served a very crucial purpose after they had narrated some near-death experiences. For example, Sharmin who was certain that the day she ran from her father's home would have been the day her father actually killed her, paused for a long time before saying that:

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> Maybe my mum left the door open that day because she knew what he [father] was going to do, and that door is always barricaded. (Sharmin)

After a second pause, Sharmin also repeated that:

> It must have been my mum. But to this date, we never talk about this. (Sharmin)

While the first silence was a way of attributing her narrow escape from being murdered to her mother, the second silence was a firm inner revelation to Sharmin, achieved through the interview process. This was a reflective judgement made by Sharmin which shows how her past shaped the way she perceived her near-death experience and the role of her mother in it. By focusing on their encounters and experiences, I was able to contextualise their moral dispositions and self-identities within their broader socio-cultural frameworks. By examining their stories, I gained insights into how they navigated their social worlds and how these interactions shaped their beliefs, sense of self, and their own interpretation of their experience of forced marriage.

### 3.4.3 Semi-structured interviews with Practitioners and Members of the South Asian community

I conducted 7 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and 6 with members of the South Asian community in the UK. These interviews were also held via Zoom or Teams and lasted from 45-60 minutes. I understand this is a heterogenous sample to administer one-on-one interviews with, however, the alternative method of focus groups was not ideal due to risks to confidentiality. In a similar qualitative study on gendered perceptions of forced marriages, researchers switched from focus groups to interviews due to confidentiality concerns and the potential for participants to disrespect each other's views during discussions of such a sensitive topic (Gill and Harvey, 2016: 79).

To access participants' subjective views (Galvani, 2006) on marriage practices and their professional experience of supporting victim-survivors of forced marriage, I employed semi-structured interviews with the community and practitioner sample. The style of interview adopted depends on the aims of the research, according to Westmarland and Bows (2018: 48). Semi-structured interviews were hence used to explore specific aspects of the research aims, in this instance, knowing more about community's perspectives about how marriages 'should' be done and their own perceptions about forced marriage, and practitioners' approaches to understanding the support needs of victim-

survivors. Therefore, these interviews supplemented and contextualised data collected from the victim-survivor sample so as to provide a broader picture of how marriages happen within the South Asian community, where do we place forced marriage victim-survivors' experiences in this broader picture, and how practitioners understand and respond to forced marriage.

The interview guide for the community sample was based on understanding the common ways of getting married, how men and women are introduced to the idea of marriage, who introduces them, how involved they feel in the decision-making process of their own marriage or how did individuals go about arranging marriages for daughters/sons (Appendix 6). Additionally, semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to explore individuals' aspirations for marriage, their vision of married life, and the challenges they expect or face in relation to marriages, especially if they were unmarried.Top of Form These conversations about arranged, love and choice-based marriages gradually transitioned into questions about forced marriage, to examine prevailing knowledge and perception about forced marriage in the British South Asian community.

Conducting semi-structured interviews with both community members and practitioners was crucial for several reasons. These interviews offered the flexibility needed to delve into participants' subjective views on marriage practices, ensuring that personal insights and experiences were captured. Simultaneously, they allowed for exploration of key areas related to supporting victim-survivors of forced marriage. Since understanding how practitioners comprehend, approach and support victim-survivors of forced marriage was another aim of this research, semi-structured interviews explored aspects of support around housing, court process, enabling disclosure and approaches to policing of forced marriage.

When conducting semi-structured interviews, I kept an 'open conversation' approach to build rapport, and began with 'small talk', much like Minocha et al. (2013). While semi-structured interviews are effective, the interviewer's ability to build trust with participants is crucial for obtaining in-depth knowledge (Punch, 2005). The interviews began with asking community members broader questions like what marriage meant to them which generally led to them talking about how they got married. Semi-structured interviews also allowed flexibility to explore issues which were not really anticipated. For example, Imran, an older male participant, noted that his daughter's marriage to a White British man shifted his view, prioritising children's wellbeing and happiness over societal expectations regarding marriage within the same religion, race, or culture. Interviews with the practitioner sample began with 'warm-up' questions about how they came to be in their professional roles and what their day-to-day work looks like (Westmarland and Bows, 2018: 52). This served the function of showing

that I was interested in the practitioners' own background and any relevant professional experiences that could inform the research, making for further probing questions (Appendix 7).

Open-ended and probing questions for the semi-structured interviews were developed based on themes from the literature review and aligned with my research questions. These questions aimed to gather insights on perceptions of forced marriage and current trends in supporting victim-survivors from the community and practitioner sample, respectively. Regular supervisions ensured the questions were relevant and clear. While a guide outlined the key questions, the sequencing and wording were flexible (Britten, 1995).

## 3.5 Research Ethics

Durham University's ethical guidelines and process were adhered to, and ethical approval given. My intention in terms of ethics was to apply ethical considerations throughout the research process (Ali et al., 2007: 80), a principle upheld by the British Sociological Association (2017) and extending to the teaching I undertook as part of my professional role at Durham University. Due to the sensitive nature of research on forced marriage, ensuring participant safety and addressing potential emotional distress was paramount (ibid). To adhere to ethical standards, I obtained informed consent using a detailed consent form with each research sample (see Appendix 8, 9 and 10), following McCarry's (2005) recommendation that participants are fully informed about the research aims and objectives. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant received a copy of the Participant Information Sheet, Participant Consent Form and list of organisations for emotional and mental health support before the interview was conducted.  Signed consent forms were stored securely on a password protected university desktop. Protecting participant confidentiality and data, including interview transcripts, was crucial to ensure their safety. Hence, pseudonyms were allocated with care taken to not include any identifiable information such as names of cities, police force, local councils, age of children.

I was also mindful of the potential negative effects research participation might have for the victim-survivors, which Renzetti and Lee (1993: 6) classify as 'intrusive threat' as the interview can be deeply personal and uncomfortable for some participants, causing emotional distress. Here, my strategy was to re-seek their consent to continue with the interview, and re-state it clearly that they could withdraw at any given time. Consent is an ongoing concept, and cannot be assumed to be straightforward,

especially for sensitive research, thus, becoming morally and ethically important to my research (Downes, Kelly and Westmarland, 2014). During data collection, participants received a list of support agencies. I also signposted them to this list with the contact details stated clearly.  Bryman's (2016) checklist and Edwards and Mauthner's (2012) guidelines for ethical considerations were followed to prevent harm to participants discussing their experiences of control and abuse in forced marriages.

## 3.6 Reflecting on my insider-outsider positionality

I now discuss my own positionality in relation to my insider-outsider role and its dynamism based on how people viewed me differently. I also breakdown my own intersecting identities to account for the ways in which I might have been thought of as an insider or an outsider. In terms of positionality, as a South Asian female, my research was initially from an insider position, however, I have felt both an insider and outsider on varying occasions whilst doing this research. I see myself as an insider on the grounds of belonging to the same sex, sharing a common social reality based on gender, same race, sharing the experience of growing up in South Asian family setup, and speaking and understanding the native languages (Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi) spoken in the Indian subcontinent. I capitalised on knowing the language and gave participants in the victim-survivors and community sample the choice to speak in Urdu, Hindi or Punjabi if they felt like it or if they could not speak English. Initiating communications based on language similarities made it easier to establish rapport with participants and increased their comfort level with me.

The participants made references relating to language, religion, customs, cuisine, attire and festivals and there was a sense of immediate understanding of what they were referring to. One participant mentioned how she made the perfect *samosas* and *rotis* —food items fondly known to South Asians. Another participant mentioned the ritual of women fasting in the Hindu religion for their husband's long life. I related to specific South Asian cultural experiences they described, nodding to show understanding and demonstrating reciprocity. I may have been inherently considered an insider when victim-survivors heard the strong Indian accent I spoke with. Roop, from the victim-survivor sample, asked me to speak in Hindi during our familiarisation phone call and said, '*we can speak in Hindi, sometimes it's good to hear someone else speaking the same language'*.

As a feminist researcher, knowledge production is centered on individual and collective experiences, meaning that a.) the social structure of a research site is interpreted differently by researchers and

participants and b.) the course of a project may only be guessed at initially (Feldman, Bell and Berger, 2003). Initially, I anticipated that being a South Asian woman would be beneficial to the data collection process and hence situated myself as an 'insider' of sorts from the start. I drew upon my professional experience of working with domestic abuse victim-survivors in New Delhi, conducting capacity-building trainings with elected women representatives in Rajasthan, and work with pregnant women about maternal nutrition in the tribal belt of Chhattisgarh. My professional experience enabled me to think of myself as an 'insider'— at least to the feminist research process. And so, I began to 'put myself out there' more as the UK is not home ground for me, a new place altogether, hence making me an 'outsider'. I attempted to get familiar with the third sector here via Twitter primarily and began to map and assess organisations supporting women from racially minoritised communities and addressing domestic abuse and forced marriages. Being active on Twitter in the form of introducing myself, my research area and requesting organisations to support me in recruitment process went a long way in not only making my research known but also raising my academic profile. I felt like an insider when sending emails to voluntary organisations for participant recruitment as our aims were the same: to understand the experience of victim-survivors of forced marriage, understand the nuances of pressure they face, and get better at providing support.

During the interviews, participants asked me questions like '*where are you from*', '*which part of Delhi*'. Questions from South Asian participants seemed aimed at sharing the experience of being from South Asia, rather than establishing my credibility. Being an insider helped me gain access and build trust, as they saw me as 'one of them.' When Harnoor, a victim-survivor, described how her marriage was 'fixed' and how she was forced to marry a man from India, she looked at me through the Zoom screen and said, '*One day, I had just come back from school, and they had laid out pictures of these men in front of me. You know where I am going with this*'. Although I anticipated where Harnoor was headed, she fully explained the 'seeing pictures of this man' process, aware I might have unconscious assumptions. It can also be said that due to the narrative inquiry method I used for interviews, this was less subject to Harnoor's conscious control (Wengraf, 2001: 115).  Harnoor conveyed an unspoken mutual understanding that made me feel like an insider, unlike other studies where shared cultural knowledge led to less detailed accounts. For instance, Couture, Zaidi, and Maticka-Tyndale (2012: 97) found that their female South Asian researcher received vague responses from South Asian students about dating and sexual encounters.

Admittedly, I inhabit multiple intersecting identities which played a role, both nuanced and direct, during the interview process. I am a single woman, born and brought up in India, who started this

research at the age of 24. I have lived in a nuclear household setting since my childhood which means my extended family does not reside in the same house but are spread out in different cities back in India. This is important because most of the victim-survivors in my sample lived in close-knit communities having their grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins either a couple of houses down the street from them or in the same house with them, here in the UK. I am an international student in this country meaning I do not have permanent stay in the UK. I might be one of the few researchers who is an international student from South Asia and hence this form of positionality is novel in forced marriage research. Coming from India, there are other identities apart from my race and the colour of my skin which accompany me— single (marital identity), heterosexual (sexual identity), Hindu (religious identity), woman (gender identity) in her mid-twenties (age) researching a specific form of gender-based violence within the British South Asian community (broader identity in terms of life and career goals).

It is only fair to situate my own pre-marital identity in the context of this research. My stance on marriage has never been unilateral. In my own immediate family setting, marriages hold a desirable and permanent position. On topics pertaining to my own marriage, I have gone from expressing dislike to accepting the idea of marrying someone. I ask participants in my study what 'good' marriages looks like, and it is only fair for me to reflect on this question myself. Initially, I used to buy into the idea of heteronormative love (Chantler, 2014) but at the root of it was Bollywood (Indian movie industry) putting the trope of 'men and women falling in love—defying all odds—their romantic love succeeding' in my head. I went on to heavily discredit this idealised notion of romantic 'movie-like' love as I started familiarising myself with feminist sociology at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I have grown up in a setting where love marriages or self-chosen spouses are not frowned upon if certain criteria like compatibility, mutual understanding and clarity about future goals are met. At the same time, I am not antagonised with the idea of an arranged marriage because there is a clear understanding between me and my parents that my choice and preferences regarding the kind of person I will marry will be mine. That ball is going to be in my court—meaning I will have the liberty to say no to a proposal or a match they bring to me, with or without explanation. If I were to think about myself with respect to marriage, I see myself with someone I choose and someone who chooses me, after getting to know each other for a considerable amount of time. There is respect both for each other and each other's careers, individuality, equality of roles—a partnership.

My single status was directly brought up by participants during the research process. One female and married participant in my study, upon seeing my WhatsApp profile picture with my brother, first

guessed that it is my husband in the picture. Upon establishing that the person in the picture is my brother and the fact that I am not married, she asked my age. She expressed surprise upon hearing my age and said:

> So, you are unmarried, almost my age and pursuing a PhD- that too on issues facing South Asian women- and you have come from India to the UK to do this- Wow, can that really be possible? (Nupur, British Indian)

I sensed that my insider status as a South Asian female was inhibited because this participant's social and cultural upbringing was different to mine and that created distance and awe at the same time. Distance because I did not hold the same experience as she had seen towards women in her family; awe because she was fascinated with what I was researching and pleasantly surprised that I was unmarried. For her, it might have meant encountering an Indian woman of a similar age, pursuing a research degree in the UK, and notably, remaining unmarried with her family's support. This contrasted sharply with her own social reality, where early marriage was prioritised over higher education.

Stephen Burrell (2019: 89) considers how our outsider position as a researcher can mean disassociating our own identities as feminists and finding ourselves in uneasy positions for not actively advocating but rather retiring to a silent spectator. I felt this when an older British Indian male made comments which attacked my insider position as a 'young unmarried Indian woman in the UK'. This was during initial informal personal correspondence; he later withdrew consent. His suggestion to me was that I should find a *desi* boy (a South Asian boy) from the UK and settle here before my student visa runs out. My insider status was thus challenged because of my status as an international student and an unmarried woman of relatively young age. This man made me an outsider because of my international student (with limited stay in the UK) and single status. As a female researcher, I felt uncomfortable not only due to his unsolicited advice, which stemmed from his view of my position as limiting, but also because of his gaze in the broader context of questioning my belonging to the South Asian community. His encouragement to find a boy and settle here suggests that, to him, permanent settlement status confers greater legitimacy as a 'South Asian community member' than limited residency. This felt like a direct dismissal of my South Asian identity, rendering me 'not insider enough' in his eyes. Consequently, my status as an international student positioned me as an outsider according to this older South Asian male.

I found it fascinating that the same position (international student status) made me an insider especially with my victim-survivor sample. In my introductions with the participants before the interviews, I told them that I am an international student. I suspect this had a role to play in the way they opened to me. Not being born and brought up in the UK meant that I had no geographical connections or direct affiliations with the wider South Asian community in the UK. This essentially placed me in an outsider role, at least initially. As the interviews progressed, I noticed there was a strange sense of trust which resulted in participants telling me detailed accounts of living in the wider South Asian community as a victim-survivor of forced marriage, as a divorced woman, or as a woman who stood up to her parents. I found it surprising that, contrary to previous research on sensitive topics (Gangoli, Razak, and McCarry, 2006; Idriss, 2018), participants were willing to open up and provide detailed accounts of their experiences. As a female South Asian researcher and an international student in the UK, what the older man saw as 'not quite a part of the South Asian community' was perceived by victim-survivors as a trustworthy identity. This combination made me an insider, allowing them to share their lived experiences within the British South Asian community more openly.

What the participants described as community—broadly uncles, aunts, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, other family relatives living a few houses down their street and sometimes distant relatives in their home countries—was a setting I was not formally part of in the UK. I felt that because I was not directly associated with any geographically existing South Asian community in the UK, it was easier for participants to divulge their experiences and trust me with their stories. Because I did not have links with any South Asian community groups, they might have assumed that their stories are safe with me. I felt that my limited immigration status and a clean record in relation to connections with South Asian communities more widely in the UK, gave the participants a double-layer of protection and a sense of anonymity. Therefore, at times, I found my journey into the South Asian community rather contradictory to what is commonly experienced by British-born South Asian researchers interviewing predominantly British-born South Asian victim-survivors of abuse (for example, Idriss 2018).

However, there were moments when my insider status felt tenuous, highlighting that insider/outsider status is not binary but fluid and context dependent. This happened especially when two victim-survivors mentioned that they do not prefer speaking to South Asian people at all. Mehreen mentioned:

> "*I am very careful of South Asians, especially women, because my perpetrator was a woman. Also, for the longest time, I refused to sit in taxis being driven by South Asian men simply*

*because I cannot trust them. I have waited for hours to get a new taxi after cancelling rides with South Asian drivers because I am so uncomfortable*".  (Mehreen, British Pakistani)

Aliyah, a victim-survivor of forced marriage, mentioned that after leaving, she kept to herself and avoided interactions with the community unless necessary. She shared similar reservations about trusting the South Asian community. At the end of the second interview, I asked her whether she felt comfortable speaking to me. Her reply was:

"*Even though you are part of the community, you are not like the community*". (Aliyah, British Bangladeshi)

Overall, I noticed that my identities shifted depending on the participant. With practitioners, my role as someone addressing forced marriage and my professional experience were more prominent than my racial and gender identities, making me feel like an insider due to our shared research interests.


## 3.7 Impact of Covid-19


I started my PhD in October 2019, but by January 2020, the pandemic had begun. As an international student in the UK, I faced isolation and a delayed adjustment to working from home. The pandemic's severity led to a suspension of non-essential travel, preventing in-person interviews. Consequently, I had to adapt my recruitment strategies for virtual work, and all 25 interviews were conducted online. This may be one of the first forced marriage studies to conduct all interviews virtually. Additionally, as noted in Chapter 3.3.1, recruitment efforts yielded limited responses due to third sector organisations focusing on immediate support for victim-survivors during the pandemic.

This research primarily includes individuals with internet access, private spaces, and digital literacy. However, many victim-survivors of forced marriage and abuse lack such resources. Conducting sensitive research online during the pandemic sometimes hindered rapport-building. Poor connections occasionally disrupted video, affecting eye contact and making it challenging for participants to gauge my engagement. This lack of visual contact could impact their sense of being heard and understood, contrary to my intention to actively listen and provide a supportive environment.

Wengraf (2001) advocates for narrative inquiry methods that offer non-directional support with minimal intervention. However, providing emotional support via a screen was challenging when

victim-survivors became distressed, cried, or paused during their accounts. Wengraf (2001: 128) emphasises the importance of non-intrusive, non-verbal support. While I tried to mirror their emotions to reassure them, the virtual setting raised doubts about whether minimal intervention was sufficient. The pandemic exacerbated this issue, making me question if more than minimal mirroring was needed to align with the feminist principles of my research. I addressed this by allowing victim-survivors time to recollect themselves, express their emotions, and take breaks as needed.

Being an international student in the UK during the pandemic significantly impacted my mental health, as I was concerned about COVID-19 developments both in India and the UK. My primary focus was my family's safety and well-being during the first lockdown. The isolation of pursuing a PhD was compounded by the pandemic, and my attempts to visit India were thwarted twice due to cancelled flights. I continued online data collection until I finally reached India in April 2021, just before the severe COVID-19 wave hit. Being with my family amid the crisis, including slow vaccine rollout and inadequate safety measures, heightened my anxiety. Witnessing India's dire medical situation firsthand, including shortages of medications, hospital beds, and oxygen, took a toll on my mental health and delayed my research progress.

## 3.8 Transcribing

With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Despite conducting all interviews online, I avoided relying on Zoom or Teams transcriptions due to their inaccuracy, particularly in recognising words spoken with diverse accents. Although transcribing is time-consuming, it is invaluable during the analysis phase (Bryman, 2016). I meticulously read through each transcript, transcribed them verbatim (Braun and Clarke, 2013), and listened to the recordings to check for errors. I repeated this process twice to ensure accuracy. This thorough checking was crucial, especially when participants used Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu words, to ensure that the transcription captured the words used and the context in which they were used. Repeatedly listening to and reading the transcripts significantly increased my familiarity with the data, which was invaluable for the subsequent coding and analysis. To ensure security of the data collected, the electronic transcripts were stored on a secure, password-protected computer system. To maintain a balanced power dynamic between researcher and participants (Letherby, 2003), I sent the transcripts to participants for review. This approach gave them control over the final content (Kelly, 1988) and ensured the data

accurately reflected their true experiences. Once all transcripts were reviewed, I began the analysis. The next section details the chosen analysis method and its rationale.

## 3.9 Data Analysis

Data analysis is essential for generating "new insight and information" (Flowerdew and Martin, 2005: 189) and must continuously account for changes throughout the research (Coghlan et al., 2007). A key objective of this study is to platform the voices of South Asian women, in line with the feminist epistemological methodology discussed earlier. The analysis is also underpinned by intersectionality which posits that categories such as gender, race, and age shape how experiences are perceived and understood (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Conway, 2013). Recognising the existence of heterogenous experiences and "multiple truths and multiple perspectives" (Mason, 2002: 177), this study adopts an inductive analytical approach. Since this research does not aim to develop a theory, Grounded Theory was not considered suitable. I also considered using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) but that has its own ontological and epistemological framework (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005), hence was also not considered suitable. While a narrative approach could have provided a more detailed chronological account of each victim-survivor's life story, I opted for thematic analysis due to its ability to compare across participants and identify shared patterns of coercion and control. This methodological choice aligns with the research aims of uncovering common mechanisms of forced marriage, rather than reconstructing individual biographies in their entirety (Reissman, 2007). Therefore, I chose thematic analysis for its relevance in identifying key patterns and themes within the data.

## 3.9.1 Doing Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a useful analytical tool used to identify important themes (patterns), offering flexibility to also be used as an epistemological approach to 'further analyse the meanings from the themes' (Sandhu, 2019: 88). This research centres on a feminist epistemology, providing a constructivist lens which sees meaning making of women's experiences as socially produced. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 85), thematic analysis "seeks to theorise the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the individual accounts that are provided". This

flexibility makes thematic analysis suitable for exploring the lifelong experiences and reflections of South Asian women at the intersection of family 'honour', shame, culture, citizenship, religion, age, marriage, marital norms, family and family narratives, and facing domestic abuse.

I transferred the transcribed data into NVivo (version 12) for analysis, considering the interview data as actively constructed narratives that reflect individuals' worldviews, similar to Mirza's (2015) approach. I created two separate data sets in NVivo: one for victim-survivors and community sample, and another for the practitioner sample. Using an inductive method, I searched for patterns within the transcripts to identify emerging themes, interpreting their meanings beyond mere descriptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84). Initially, I familiarised myself with the data by reading, re-reading, and writing down initial thoughts, aligning with Braun and Clarke's (2006) first step in thematic analysis. Although this research does not adopt a formal narrative analysis, it recognises the life-course nature of forced marriage by structuring themes around 'Before,' 'During,' and 'After' the marriage. This ensures that the sequential aspect of experiences remains central. For instance, the theme of 'normalisation of control in childhood' is explicitly linked to later vulnerabilities in marriage, mirroring a narrative progression even within a thematic framework.

In the second step, generating initial codes involved identifying recurring themes, coding, categorising relevant quotes, and establishing coherent knowledge and relationships within these themes. At this stage, data from the victim-survivor sample began to organise around a central timeline of 'Before', 'During', and 'After' forced marriage. Thematic analysis allows for the identification of cross-cutting issues that might not emerge as clearly in a strictly narrative approach (Reissman, 2007). For example, themes such as 'coercion through economic dependency' and 'formal help-seeking' were present across multiple victim-survivor accounts, highlighting systemic patterns rather than individual trajectories. This approach strengthens the policy relevance of the findings by demonstrating how coercion operates at multiple levels.

As patterns emerged within each theme, I noticed how victim-survivors' narratives comprised of considerable distinct events before, during, and after their forced marriages, interlinked with the thread of ongoing control. Because of the layers of control experienced by the victim-survivors before, during and after their forced marriage, the analysis began to look like distinct set of 'this happened after this' which I see as a process. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will cover this more in detail. Thus, sub-themes were clustered around central organising concepts or main themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 224). For example, within the central concept of the 'web of control', sub-themes included 'Lack of support by parents', 'Control by husband', 'Community as limiting', and 'Global political economy'.

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After identifying the initial themes of 'Before', 'During', and 'After', I elaborated on the constituting themes and sub-themes within each and began writing a preliminary analysis, linking them to the overarching themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The first key overarching theme, 'Before', explored women's experiences of control and power from childhood, including power dynamics within the family, actions deemed 'bad' leading to control and abuse, and their upbringing to be obedient, which affected their sense of self.

In the fourth step, I reviewed the themes, identifying additional codes or merging some sub-themes. I refined and clearly defined the themes, following the fifth step of defining and naming themes. For instance, I distinguished 'After the forced marriage' to specifically refer to the act of leaving the marriage, while aspects of contemplating leaving were covered under the sub-theme of 'Planning to Leave'.

Finally, I extracted the confirmed themes that most closely related to the research questions and addressed the literature gaps identified in Chapter 2.

The analysis showed that generating themes is not a linear process. Braun and Clarke (2019) call this refined method 'reflexive thematic analysis,' emphasising that qualitative data analysis is never truly complete, but rather ends when the researcher decides. This approach was used in the current study, with themes constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed during regular supervisory meetings.

## 3.9.2 Weaving Positionality into Data Analysis

Rather than confining positionality to the methodology chapter, I integrate reflections on my positionality within the data analysis to show how it shaped my interpretations. Throughout the research process, my identity as a South Asian female researcher influenced not only participant interactions but also the coding and interpretation of themes.

### 3.9.2.1 Impact on Thematic Interpretation

My positionality played a crucial role in shaping how I identified and analysed themes, particularly regarding gendered expectations of duty within South Asian families. The theme of 'control through emotional obligation' emerged strongly, reflecting the ways in which victim-survivors described familial expectations around obedience, self-sacrifice, and honour. My familiarity with South Asian

cultural norms allowed me to recognise implicit forms of coercion—such as religious rhetoric, emotional blackmail, and economic dependency—that participants may not have explicitly framed as coercive. However, I remained cautious of overinterpreting these themes through my own cultural lens and ensured that my analysis was firmly grounded in participants' own articulations of their experiences.

The interweaving of positionality into data presentation also required reflexivity in cases where my assumptions were challenged. For example, while I initially expected narratives of forced marriage to centre primarily on coercion, some women framed their experiences as acts of family loyalty, despite acknowledging the constraints they faced. This required me to critically engage with the complexities of their agency within oppressive structures. By remaining attentive to these nuances, I sought to balance the insights of my insider perspective with the integrity of participants' lived realities, ensuring that my thematic analysis remained both rigorous and ethically grounded.

Thematic analysis, as opposed to narrative analysis, also shaped how positionality manifested in the results chapter. The process of coding and categorising themes across participants allowed me to identify patterns of coercion and control, highlighting how these experiences were structured within larger socio-cultural frameworks rather than isolated individual stories. While a more detailed and ongoing discussion of positionality throughout the results chapter could have provided further reflexivity, the choice to structure findings thematically meant that the emphasis remained on the patterns emerging from the data rather than on my positional engagement in every instance. To ensure balance, I wove reflections on positionality at key analytical junctures, particularly where my own interpretations intersected with or were challenged by the narratives of victim-survivors.

Additionally, thematic analysis allowed me to examine intersections across multiple narratives, revealing broader structures of control and coercion that may not have been as immediately visible through a purely narrative approach (Reissman, 2007). This comparative aspect helped ensure that the research remained focused on amplifying the collective voices of victim-survivors rather than centring my own role within the research process. The reflexive approach taken within the methodology chapter and in moments of analysis throughout the results chapters provides a reasoned balance, ensuring that positionality remains a considered but unobtrusive element of the interpretative process.

### 3.9.3 A Note on Presenting the Findings

Different narratives appear in the 'before', 'during' and 'after' result chapters, leading to certain participants reappearing at various points.  Not all victim-survivors have experiences categorised under 'During' or 'After', but all have a 'Before'. Understanding the 'Before' is crucial for understanding how forced marriages happen.  Mehreen, for instance, does not fit into the 'After' or 'During' categories but is included in the 'Responses to Help-Seeking' chapter, i.e. Chapter 7, highlighting how the narratives of victim-survivors are interwoven throughout the results chapters. Data from interviews with the community sample appears in the 'Before' chapter; practitioners in the 'Responses to Help-Seeking' chapter, reflecting a targeted threading of data in the results chapters. Therefore, the presentation of the research findings not only aligns with the analysis but also deeply connects with women's narratives about their lives before, during and after the forced marriage. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 present the findings from this research.

A biographical approach with the victim-survivors has allowed me to deeply understand victim-survivors' experiences, revealing pervasive and relentless control throughout their life-course. This approach highlights the ongoing nature of the oppression they faced, making their narratives more coherent and reflective of their lived realities. The challenge in making sense of these accounts has been to honour each of them but also to realise that South Asian women are not just victimised by forced marriage, but also ongoing control throughout their lives.  Some women escape before the forced marriage occurs, some obtain divorces, and some endure multiple forced marriages. It is crucial to understand how forced marriages happen differently for different South Asian women, the factors that keep them in these marriages, how they eventually leave, and the challenges they face post-leaving. This is how I have made sense of the data and the analysis of that data, which is to see forced marriage as a process rather than a single event which completely changes victim-survivors' lives. I have aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of forced marriage by highlighting the multifaceted, complex and ongoing nature of victim-survivors' experiences of abuse, control and coercion, profoundly impacting the lives of South Asian women.

### Summary

This chapter has outlined the feminist and qualitative methodological approach underpinning this research, shaped by an intersectional framework that prioritises the lived experiences of British South

Asian women. The use of biographical narrative interviews with victim-survivors allowed for a life-course perspective, capturing the nuanced and cumulative nature of coercion and control before, during, and after forced marriage. This approach was particularly effective in disrupting linear, event-based models of forced marriage, and instead allowed for a textured understanding of the lifelong harms and relational complexities embedded in family, community and more broader structural contexts.

Alongside interviews with victim-survivors, the inclusion of two additional samples—community members and practitioners—broadened the scope and analytical lens of the research. Community interviews revealed tensions between cultural scripts, shifting norms and women's agency, while practitioner accounts contextualised institutional responses to forced marriage, highlighting both areas of improvement and entrenched limitations. The three-tiered sampling strategy enabled this research to trace the social reproduction of control across intimate, family, community and institutional levels.

An in-depth account of the fieldwork is provided, including participant recruitment and the interview process, with reflections on the experience. Post-fieldwork tasks such as transcription and the use of thematic analysis are explained, and the importance of ethical considerations is highlighted. I also reflect on my positionality as a South Asian female researcher on the research process. Although limited in size due to the impact of COVID-19 and the sensitivity of the topic, the study's depth of insight was enabled by careful attention to ethical considerations, reflexivity and iterative analysis. The use of thematic analysis—grounded in feminist principles—allowed the research to retain the complexity of participants' voices while drawing out key patterns that informed new theoretical and conceptual developments, such as the 'web of control'. This chapter has thus laid the foundation for the empirical and conceptual contributions that follow and demonstrates how the methodological framework directly supported the research aim: to illuminate the multidirectional, persistent and layered nature of control in forced marriage contexts.

# Findings and Discussion

## Chapter 4: Before the Forced Marriage- Behind the Scenes

### Introduction

This research characterises the process-based nature of forced marriage by illuminating abusive and controlling familial contexts within which coercion is employed and conformity to family narrative is achieved. This chapter takes a step back: forced marriage is not a one-off event which occurs suddenly. Drawing on longstanding feminist arguments about the social construction of gender within British South Asian communities (Gill, 2014; Gill and Harvey, 2016), I argue that women are conditioned from childhood to conform to rigid definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, as well as what is deemed honourable or dishonourable in their choices, actions, and behaviours. In this chapter, I break down gendered socialisation into conformity and control through the narratives conveyed, and reprisals witnessed and experienced by women about what they could or could not do, at home and outside, at the nexus of gendered, cultural and parental/familial expectations. This chapter also draws on the community sample to highlight the shared experiences of socialisation into and grooming for marriage among young girls across both groups (victim-survivors and community samples). By charting the distinction between these two samples, the research will provide a clear explanation of why some women experience forced marriage while others do not. This distinction is crucial for understanding the factors that lead to forced marriage and those that allow for the possibility of choice.

This chapter centralises the argument that consent is constructed within the backdrop of socialisation into gender role conformity and control. I argue that the process of forcing women and girls into marriage starts very early on, with their decision-making around their own marriage strongly inhibited or regulated to the point where their consent is not even a priority. Women are groomed not only for marriage, but also for accepting control in intimate aspects of their life. Conformity is premeditatedly incorporated into women by instilling fear of reprisal or upsetting parents, and guilt and shame for not being a 'good daughter'—with control operationalised throughout (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). This chapter covers the control experienced by victim-survivors from their parents and natal family before the actual forced marriage took place. A common thread is their learnt/inherited understanding of the mechanisms of 'honour' marked by control, fear, shame, conformity and explicit expectations from

parents. The following quote by Sharmin eloquently encapsulates the need to consider what happens in the 'before' stage in relation to forced marriage later in life:

> So, the way I describe my experience is even from a young age, coercion began as soon as you are born. As a South Asian woman, coercive control is something…. you don't even know it's coercive control. So, from who you're getting married to, how you're supposed to conduct yourself, what you wear, what you eat, who you can be friends with- all started from a young age. (Sharmin)

This chapter deliberately centres parental coercive control rather than employing the broader framework of HBA to highlight the individualised mechanisms of coercion within parent-child relationships. While HBA accounts for collective and socio-cultural enforcement of gendered restrictions (Kaur, 2019; Gill and Walker, 2020), coercive control foregrounds the persistent and intimate strategies women's parents used to erode choice. Parental control is uniquely legitimised by social expectations of authority, masking coercion under the guise of discipline and care. By highlighting control by parents, this research demonstrates how the foundations for forced marriage are laid in early childhood through emotional blackmail, threats of disownment and the systematic suppression of agency. This analytical focus is a direct outcome of the narratives of victim-survivors. Across the interviews, control by parents emerged as the most dominant and persistent form of coercion they experienced. Their testimonies overwhelmingly pointed to parents as the central agents of coercion in their lives, more so than extended family or community members. While HBA remains a crucial backdrop, coercive control is the primary mechanism of gendered oppression within the domestic sphere, necessitating a focused analytical lens that reflects the lived realities of those affected.

## 4.1 Control as 'part-and-parcel' in women's formative years

Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control as a "liberty crime" wherein a woman's freedom is micro-regulated both literally and symbolically by restricting her thoughts and behavior (Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly and Klein, 2018: 164) has immense potential to be applied outside intimate partner relationships. Additionally, when viewed through the lens of child maltreatment frameworks, these early experiences align with psychological abuse and neglect, as they significantly hinder autonomy, emotional development, and the capacity for independent decision-making (Khan et al., 2015; Teicher

and Parigger, 2015). The victim-survivors in this research reflected on their childhood as a time rife with continuous fear, abuse, intimidation, little unsupervised free time, degradation, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour which undermined their sense of self and individual identity — denoting gendered socialisation parallelling as recognised forms of child abuse:

> I have always lived with them [aunt and uncle] since I was 6 or 7. Like, I think now it's like modern slavery because I used to do all the housework before going to sleep at night at that age. I wouldn't get food literally. But basically, when she used to make food in the kitchen, I would stand there while she's cooking the food, just so she could see that I am not enjoying myself with other kids. And I think she just liked that control, she used to call me 'soldier' while standing there. And if she needed anything, she'd just say my name, well she wouldn't say my name, but you know she'd call me names and she would say "give me that" kind of things. Like I was a PA [personal assistant] in a way. (Mehreen)

The accounts of victim-survivors in this research reveal that control is not merely about imposing restrictions but about systematically wearing down resistance over time. This aligns with recent scholarship that identifies exhaustion as a central mechanism of coercive control (Bassil, 2019). Women's daily experiences of domestic servitude, intimidation, and continuous micro-regulation serve as a means of inducing both physical and psychological fatigue, thereby undermining their ability to resist or assert autonomy (Myhill & Hohl, 2016). This cumulative exhaustion functions as a key strategy within coercive control, ensuring that compliance is not simply demanded but is ultimately the only viable option left for women. This research found that the preparatory work and 'grooming' (Chantler and McCarry, 2020) before a forced marriage constitutes not only planting the seeds of (an early) marriage, but more than that: molding girls and young women to normalise and submit to control (Anderson, 2009), especially in familial and future marital relationships. Concerted efforts to prevent her from enjoying herself as a child and being compelled into household chores is how Mehreen sees her aunt as having control over her. Gendered socialisation into household chores, in fact, was one of the earliest forms of unspoken but tangibly felt control, setting off embryonic feelings of fear of the perpetrators. Recent research highlights that exhaustion, whether through forced domestic labor, relentless surveillance, or constant emotional strain, leads to learned helplessness, making individuals more susceptible to control (Stark, 2007; Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly, & Klein, 2018). The interplay between exhaustion and coercive control is particularly evident in how victim-survivors described their inability to relax or enjoy childhood, as noted in Harnoor's testimony:

We basically knew what was expected from us. If ever we didn't conform to what we were supposed to do, like for instance, if my mom ever came upstairs and we were sitting down and there were dishes on the table and we haven't put them away or we haven't washed the dishes and we haven't taken them into the kitchen, she would raise a fuss…so like we weren't allowed to relax, we weren't allowed to be kids and same thing at night time. If we left the dish in the sink, or if was it washed and we left things in the dish rack, because back then there were no dishwashers or anything, if we left it in the dish rack and didn't dry them up with a tea towel, put everything away, you know that was wrong as well. We would get shouted at. We would get slapped at. We would get put in the cellar you know for things like that or if we answered back.. like even if we said something, like we weren't ever rude or disrespectful because we knew we couldn't be. But if we ever said anything like "that's not fair" or anything like she didn't like, we will get slapped and we will get put down in the cellar. (Harnoor)

The persistent state of vigilance and deprivation of rest—both physical and emotional—illustrates how exhaustion is not incidental but a deliberate strategy. The systematic erosion of resistance is a hallmark of coercive control, ensuring that victim-survivors not only comply but also internalise a belief in their powerlessness, making future resistance seem futile (Anderson, 2009; Gill & Gould, 2019). Additionally, the nature of the socialisation process relating to household chores elucidates something bigger. In Harnoor's case, it sets the precedence for what was expected of her: conformity and compliance. Evidently, this is the first experience of control women feel in their formative years setting the course for what would happen if they did not conform to what was expected of them, as Harnoor says. Through monopolisation of young girls' time in the kitchen – seemingly resembling exploitation through domestic servitude– the initial groundwork for conformity is laid. The kitchen became one of the first places where women in their childhood were introduced to subliminal control by learning the impact their behavior or actions would have. This form of control was intense enough to influence their behaviour, resultantly preventing any scope of subverting gendered oppression in their homes. Places like the cellar become synonymous with 'places of punishment for non-conformity' (Arnold, 2009). They are not 'allowed to be kids', thus only ever doing what was expected of them – a key characteristic of the continued "training", as described by Harnoor below, they received to comply without questions:

All I remember from when I was 7-8 years old, is when I came home from school, a lot of like cooking, washing the dishes, cleaning.. that was basically my life and so we were actually just trained to be very like subservient, trained to be quiet, not talk back. (Harnoor)

This research notes that socialisation into control as the natural order in women's lives is experienced prior to socialisation into marriage, thus making the coercive control lens useful to better understand the dynamics of control and coercion, and the realities of consent. The way that victim-survivors spoke about their 'old lives' (as they often referred to the time spent early on with perpetrators, i.e., family) crystallised the fact that a deeper exploration into the place held by choice and consent in South Asian communities in the UK is crucial (Gill, 2014). The way their choices were curbed is synonymous with how the women experienced control as part-and-parcel of their growing up years —the exact and intended aim of their perpetrators. Additionally, women recognised how extra-familial temporal and spatial reminders further propelled their family to 'keep them in line'.

Importantly, the data suggests that control was not just enforced within the home but was psychologically extended into public spaces to make girls feel that their behavior was being constantly monitored. This contributed to a sense that the outside world was neither safe nor a place where help could be sought. Sharmin's growing body, indicating potential sexuality, and the fact that an old man admonished her father for letting her wear Western clothes, was considered reminder enough by her father to not only stop her from dressing a certain way, but also going a step forward and placing restrictions on her movement, thereby achieving the regulation expected by wider community:

> Come the age of 10-11, I was prevented from wearing Western clothes, so T-shirts because my breasts were growing and an old Asian man made a comment to my dad, condemning him for letting us dress a certain way. So, I was banned from going to my father's shop, as was my older sister. And compared to other Bengali families, for instance, Eid time, other Asian families would go from one house to another, all dressed up. But we still weren't allowed out unless my dad…he obviously had a shop and if it was Bakra-Eid, my dad is at the shop, even if it is Eid, he is at the shop- so we weren't allowed out. (Sharmin)

In another instance, Mehreen, in her preteen years, was physically abused for 'running around' in a public space.

> It's like, once we were in a one-stop shopping centre in [UK city], we went shopping and I was a child then and we were running around like "catch me" and my auntie, she goes to my uncle "Look, she's dancing…in public". And then he literally, he held me from behind my neck, took me to the car, and I got the biggest beating when I got home. I got whipped with belts….for running and chasing and apparently I was dancing. (Mehreen)

In both cases, seemingly benign public behaviours were interpreted as shameful performances of female sexuality. These spatial reminders of surveillance reinforced the idea that girls' conduct in public would be scrutinised and judged—not just by family, but by the wider community. What they assumed to be "dancing in public" might have also been linked to a display of sexuality, hence deemed worthy of reprimand (Sandhu and Barrett, 2024; Gill and Gould, 2019). The psychological extension of domestic control into public life thus served as a powerful strategy to inhibit girls' sense of autonomy and safety in public spaces, and to suppress help-seeking behavior. This deepens our understanding of how control mechanisms in forced marriage contexts extend far beyond the private realm, subtly regulating girls' bodies and choices through a continual sense of being watched.

The coercive control model is not widely applied in children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse in family settings. It is known that children can experience entrapment and coercive control by seeing their mothers being abused by and scared of the perpetrator/father (Thiara and Gill, 2010a; Katz, 2015: 53). Only one victim-survivor in this research recounted her mother "being both a victim [by the father] and perpetrator of domestic abuse". Sharmin's account below demonstrates her perception of her mother as a secondary victim acting under the key perpetrator's control:

> When I was a child, I remember once when my dad tried to hackle the door down and tried to kill my mom with the *daah*- it's something we cut vegetables with. And he is hacking the door down…My mom also went through a lot with him [the father]… But with some mothers, even with 'honour'-based killings, you know Shafilea Ahmed, how her mother took place in it all- holding the daughter down while her father killed her through suffocation on that carrier bag- her mother didn't have a choice in that- does that make sense? Because she's thinking about…even my mom when she beat me up, she left my father to beat me or even murder me, she didn't enjoy doing that. She did that because "what about the younger siblings". If you tolerate me behaving like this, how will they marry off the younger siblings. (Sharmin)

The contrast drawn with the case of Shafilea Ahmed (discussed in 2.3.2) is interesting and points to the similarities Sharmin sees between her mother and Shafilea's mother: both appearing to be engaging in 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti, 1988: 285) by punishing daughters for non-conformity; retaining victims within the family, perpetuating the cycle of abuse and setting a precedent for younger siblings. Sharmin sees her mother's attitudes temporally concrete and sometimes reflecting systemic contradictions (Aplin, 2017) – in line with the "coping mechanisms" women are obligated to perform. Mothers, who have also been victimised by the perpetrators, too appear to navigate the 'patriarchal bargain', sometimes by punishing daughters for non-conformity and being complicit in perpetrator's

narrative (Gill, 2014), while sometimes strategically operating within their constrained circumstances (Aplin, 2017: 7). Mothers function as both victims and enforcers, reinforcing the intergenerational transmission of coercive control. Exposure to domestic violence, particularly fathers' control over mothers, normalises gendered parental maltreatment. Kandiyoti's (1988) 'patriarchal bargain' explains how mothers uphold coercion as a survival strategy, fearing repercussions for themselves and their daughters.

Yet, a key observation of this research is that all victim-survivors had first-hand experienced forms of control and abuse, explicitly directed at them, rather than a cascaded-down effect from mother to child. The perpetrators, for all victim-survivors represented in this research, were their parents (either one or both parents), and uncles/aunts. In terms of the pre-forced marriage phase, coercive control is a family affair. Every adult has a part to play either in instigating the socialisation or in colluding with it or in pointing to gaps in the socialisation (as they see it) that need to be addressed. For instance, punishment for running around a shopping centre is not just a punishment for that behaviour, but it points out the flaw in child's upbringing– they have not taken on the rules well enough to understand that – leaving dishes in the sink or answering back or running around in a shopping centre – are evidence of non-conformity to gendered socialisation and expected norms of femininity (Oakley, 2016).


Initial degrees of control were endemic to the childhood of victim-survivors in this research. Notably, growing up under parental control did not automatically result in forced marriage; what was automatically achieved was building a consistent context of control which significantly inhibited lack of choice. In fact, choice is being constructed as outside the girl/woman's realm of possibility from a very young age where 'choice' is equal to parental choice, not individual choice. In many ways, such context enforces conformity implying that women were socialised into believing that there was no other way of being a good daughter/child. The messaging around control ranged from non-verbal to explicit but was definitely tangibly felt by victim-survivors. The preparatory work involving instilling fear and exercising control in young girls' lives subsequently shapes the way they conform to the family narrative and resist conformity. The consequences of resisting conformity concurrently increased feelings of fear of the perpetrator (Anderson, 2009), as experienced by Sharmin when recounting the ramifications of exercising low degrees of choice by applying nail polish:

So even from a young age, we knew that you are not allowed to date, you are not even allowed to put nail polish on. I remember a time in school where I put nail polish, and my father – I was hiding in wardrobes, cupboards, under the bed – I always used to hide from my father. I was very fearful of my dad. Even though he provided us safety in the pack, there was a lot of fear from my dad. (Sharmin)

This section highlighted that control is incorporated into everyday lives of women since a very young age and is pertinent to understanding the 'groomed for marriage' process (Chantler and McCarry, 2020). Something is happening before the forced marriage: socialisation into accepting varying degrees of control, and lack of choice, occurs, with women being told how they can expect to be treated by others, thus naturalising control and naturalising others to control them later in life, as will be shown in the 'During' chapter. To become used to control has resonance with becoming used to not saying no to parents' wishes. It is almost as if parental/familial perpetrators are setting a precedence for making young women internalise that they must marry according to their parents' wishes. The next section specifically discusses how control manifested in the decision-making around participants' marriages.

## 4.2 Gendered socialisation into 'honour', marriage and choice

This section focuses on how women are socialised into concept of 'honour', which plays a significant role in their socialisation into control. The interconnected emphasis on domestication, the goal of marriage, and the pressure to 'never do anything which would shame or embarrass the parents' is evident in how conformity to this socialisation pervades their childhoods. It is characterised by stereotypical constructions of femininity, emphasising subservience, obedience and the strong expectation to become a 'good' future housewife and mother (Sanghera, 2009). Women from the community sample also echoed similar understandings of 'honour'. The following quote by Nisa, in her early 40s, gives a good indication of behaviours which are considered 'wrong' and bring shame to the family:

Growing up, it was a big deal. Growing up, *izzat* is related to your whole family. So, it's not just you. So, if you do something wrong, you bring shame on your whole family. And that wrong is wearing skimpy clothes for example. Getting married to somebody who is not of your religion

or not of your caste. Not listening to your parents, as well, you know, brings dishonour. (Nisa, female, 40s: *community sample*)

It is noteworthy that all women in this research reflected on 'honour' as *their* actions or behaviours (social, personal or sexual) deeply impacting their "whole family", reinforcing the narrative that women and women's bodies are key vessels which hold the 'honour' of a family (Wilson, 2006; Bond, 2014; Gill, 2014). This differentiates gendered maltreatment from other forms of child abuse, as the justification for control is rooted in the family's collective standing in the community rather than solely individual parental authority. The concept of 'shame' thus extends the coercive control framework beyond the domestic sphere, embedding it into wider social expectations. Unlike broader forms of child maltreatment (Teicher and Parigger, 2015), gendered socialisation in this research is deeply embedded in the ideology of 'honour' and shame, which is unique to certain cultural contexts. Importantly, the coercive connotations of 'honour' become more evident in relation to pre-marital relationships, choosing an intimate partner or choice of partner for marriage (Sanghera, 2009; Sandhu and Barrett, 2023). Being involved with "someone outside your religion or caste" was unanimously considered 'wrong' by participants in both the victim-survivor and community samples. Furthermore, victim-survivors recalled receiving harsh ultimatums, acerbic warnings and commentaries from perpetrators, signifying just how 'wrong' this was in their families, and also participants' socialisation into never deviating from the mechanisms of family 'honour':

> And this *izzat* thing, this 'honour' thing is always on my mind so anything I did in my life I always remembered that. And my mum used to say, 'If I hear anything with a boy I will…' You know, she used to threaten me that basically we will either disown you or we will, you know, you know, like kill you basically. We will slit your throat, you know? And so I have always been, that fear has been inside me. (Aliyah)

Aliyah's narrative denotes how the concept of 'honour' operates as a powerful tool of social control within some family structures, symbolising micro-regulation of women's behaviours in their childhoods (Stark, 2007; Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). The fear of dishonour acts as a pervasive and internalised force that shapes her behavior and life choices. The threat of severe punishment, including disownment or even death, is used to enforce conformity and obedience. This creates a culture of fear where personal desires and autonomy are suppressed to maintain family 'honour', also accounting for impact on her self-esteem and overall well-being. The mother's role in reinforcing these threats underscores the complex dynamics within the family. As pointed out in the earlier section, while mothers may also be victims of the patriarchal system, they often become enforcers of its rules,

perpetuating the cycle of control and abuse (Kandiyoti, 1988; Aplin, 2017). The quote illustrates the gendered nature of 'honour'-related expectations and the disproportionate burden placed on women. The fear instilled in Aliyah is a method to ensure compliance with societal and familial expectations, effectively limiting her autonomy and freedom, raising questions about how Aliyah might find ways to assert autonomy, even in limited ways. Victim-survivors described the compounding nature of exhaustion, where the psychological toll of constant monitoring and punishment left them with diminished capacity to assert agency. Research on coercive control in domestic abuse contexts suggests that prolonged exposure to such conditions makes it more difficult for individuals to challenge authority (izzidien, 2008; Thiara & Gill, 2010; Katz, 2015). At times, victim-survivors also recounted incidents of violence after having interacted with boys and men outside the family, in any capacity, denoting hyper-punishment along the axes of gender, age and place. The following account demonstrates Mehreen's experience of being punished after kicking a ball back to a boy in her neighborhood, and later for developing a liking to a boy she met virtually:

> I remember one of our neighbours, [name], he..I'd be with children then and honestly I didn't think the way she [aunt] made it out, I never ever thought like that. I was a child, and I don't think any child thinks about sexuality or sex when they are a child anyway. I think people make it into an evil situation kind of thing. So, I passed him his ball because [name] said "Can you kick the ball back" and I go upstairs and I got the biggest slap on earth for kicking a ball back to a boy. So, it's things like that and obviously when I went back home [years later to Pakistan], it was very much like "you're in this ward, in this 4-walled jail whatever you wanna call it because you're not allowed to speak to boys. And because you've spoken to a boy, that's why you're being punished today, and that's why you're here kind of thing. (Mehreen)

A strict adherence to family's narrative around 'honour' is threaded in women's accounts of receiving potential or actual punishment, demonstrating that not choosing their own partners is normalised, along with being prepared to accept control– signs of gendered socialisation into both 'honour' and control (Gill, 2014). Punishments for playing with boys or wearing nail polish (as seen in Sharmin's quote earlier) exemplify the disproportionate regulation of female sexuality and social behavior. Such control is not merely about discipline but about safeguarding family 'honour', creating a unique form of coercion. The community's scrutiny intensifies this control, compelling parents to act as enforcers of patriarchal norms rather than caregivers (Khan et al., 2015). Parallelly, there are consequences for those who believe this rule does not apply for them. For Mehreen, dire consequences were felt when

she was later deceived into going to Pakistan under the pretext of marrying a boy she had chosen on her own.

On the other hand, the community sample showed some variation in terms of choice of partner. Some female married participants discussed how love marriages, and essentially the idea of self-selected spouses, were disparaged, highlighting how such unions were often stigmatised or strictly prohibited (Chantler, 2014). This opposition reveals a preference for arranged marriages as a means to maintain social order and uphold family 'honour', reflecting broader societal norms and values that prioritise collective reputation over individual desires (Shariff, 2012). It also underscores the tension between personal autonomy and cultural expectations, illustrating how communal pressure can suppress personal choices in favour of adhering to traditional practices and family expectations (Simmons and Burn, 2013). For instance, Nupur had not only internalised that marrying for love was a far-fetched idea for her, but also that it was an 'irresponsible' thing to do akin to it not being expected from her:

> I always thought I would have an arranged marriage. I didn't think, you know, that I would meet someone and fall in love and, you know, that wasn't even a possibility. I was a very submissive girl, I was very responsible. (Nupur, mid- 30s: *community sample*)

Nazma, a female participant in her 60s from the community sample reflected on her arranged marriage, noting how it was conducted hastily and without her input. Her realisation that no one sought her consent parallels findings in earlier research (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006), where women, in hindsight, recognise the absence of choice in their arranged marriages but stop short of labelling them as forced marriages. A critical nuance is highlighted in this research: the blurred line between arranged and forced marriages, where social and familial pressures often obscure the autonomy of women, yet the experiences are not explicitly recognised as coercive:

> When I was getting married, I didn't know that I was getting married. I was 19 years old. When I returned from college, I found out that my father has arranged my marriage. I actually could not believe it at the time, felt like it was all a dream because it was so sudden. I got married within 15 days, and within a month, I came to London. It was like a young girl still in her dreams. When I came here, I saw that when my husband used to go to work, I was completely alone in a room. It hit me then, like, wait, what has just happened to me! I have left my family. I never had the time to think, that is how I got married. That's the reason, when I see my own case, I hate it when parents do that to their children. Ask the girls first, see if they are ready or not,

happy or not. I am lucky that my husband turned out good, but it could have been wrong too. (Nazma, 60s: *community sample*)

It's notable that, while Nazma recognised the emotional impact of not being consulted about her marriage and described the rushed experience as feeling like a dream, she also viewed the outcome as fortunate because her "husband turned out to be good". This suggests that her marriage, while lacking her initial consent, was not marked by violence or abuse—either from her husband or her traditional but non-abusive family. The key distinction between women in the community sample and those in the victim-survivor sample seems to lie in the presence or absence of abuse within the marriage. While her experience clearly reflects a "lack of informed consent to marriage", she does not categorise it as a forced marriage, similar to findings by Gangoli, Razak and McCarry (2006). Instead, she reserves the label of forced marriage for those situations where women experience abuse from their husbands after such marriages. This distinction underscores how the perception of coercion and force in marriage is often linked not merely to the absence of consent but more significantly to the presence of subsequent abuse within such marriages (Gangoli et al., 2011).

Interestingly, there were also instances where women in the community sample were given more choice in relation to their decisions about their marriage. In her childhood, Zoya learnt from her relatives that she was promised to marry her cousin brother in her country of origin. Amid all this, she formed a view that she would not be permitted to choose her own partner for marriage. However, on a family holiday to her country of origin, she made a significant realisation facilitated by her father about family obligations and consent. The following narrative reveals a common issue where family members may assume or propagate certain promises or expectations without the explicit consent or knowledge of all involved parties:

> We had gone on holiday back home. And my dad's sister had come around with her son's proposal and that's when reality kicked in where she was like, "oh no, you've been promised to us". And when I saw my dad speak up, that's when I realised that no, it was all hearsay. It was all what his brothers and his family was making up. It wasn't actually my dad. Because my dad said, "I had never, ever given you my word. I've said to you you're welcome to ask for my daughter's hand in front of my face. If my daughter agrees, that's fine. If she doesn't agree then you're not taking my daughter". So, I heard- obviously, I witnessed that. (Zoya, late-30s: *community sample*)

Zoya's father's response emphasises the importance of the individual's consent over familial agreements or societal pressures. In a context where familial promises carry significant weight, this incident sheds light on the internal power structures within families, where older family members might assert authority or make decisions on behalf of younger members (Sandhu, 2019). This is also an example of other older male members challenging or redefining these power structures reflecting a broader societal change where women's personal choices are increasingly valued over collective family decisions. Zoya's father's statement also suggests an evolving perspective on marriage, where the emphasis is on mutual consent and personal happiness rather than merely fulfilling traditional obligations. Zoya's father's response also corresponds with a male member of the British South Asian community in his mid-60s. Imran also positions his children's choice, interest and preference over family obligations or deference, and has a positive view of his children choosing their own partners:

> Imran: If, for example, a proposal comes through for my son or my daughter and they say, no, no, they're not interested. I'd say, fine. I would take no offence.
>
> AD: And what if they come up with their own partners? What would you say then hypothetically?
>
> Imran: I will be very receptive as well. In fact, I would prefer this option over the other one, that if my daughter and son tell us, oh I like this boy or this girl, yeah? And we were going into relationship, or we have started relationship. I would not mind at all. (Imran, mid-60s, *community sample*)

Such perspectives signify a broader, positive shift towards promoting and respecting individual autonomy within familial relationships, indicating that the gendered socialisation into marriage as well as 'honour' was distinct for some participants in the community sample since there was an emphasis on the importance of individual consent in marriage decisions. Imran admitted that he would not hold such modern views about how children should get married 20-30 years ago illustrating that with time, there is a change in thinking about marriages, and the role of choice in it. Part of this change has to do with his own daughter having a relationship with a man outside her religion and expressing a strong desire to marry him. Imran initially did see this as a 'non-conforming' behaviour and did not accept the union before finally realising that "he will eventually lose his daughter" and "that she is actually very happy with him". Such perspectives signify a broader, positive shift towards promoting and respecting individual autonomy within familial relationships, indicating that gendered socialisation into marriage and 'honour' differed for some participants in the community sample, with a clear

emphasis on the importance of individual consent in marriage decisions. Another key distinction in the community sample is that parents prioritise their daughters' interests over their own expectations shaped by family and community norms.

Being able to negotiate with family norms to assert individual autonomy is gendered in nature (Gill and Harvey, 2016). For example, most women who participated in this research agreed that they could not go against their parents' wishes or decisions. It can be an easier path to navigate for men with the ability to not only reject matches brought by parents but also to definitively discontinue the topic of marriage. In the following excerpt, Hamza, in his early 30s, talks about how he maintains a continuous response when his mother brings up the topic of his marriage:

> So, as far as I'm aware my mum had a shortlist of people and, and as soon as I found out, I basically shut it down and said.... I basically said, 'don't you dare'. I just said you'd be wasting your time and you you'll end up embarrassing yourself if you arrange something where they need to come here, or I need to go somewhere, I'm just not gonna be there. So it's gonna be egg on your face. So she didn't go forward, she can't. (Hamza, early 30s, *community sample*)

In contrast to the experiences of women who are socialised into seeing marriage and marital decision-making as something that aligns with parental choice rather than their own individual interests (as is evident in the victim-survivor sample), Hamza's experience shows a different possibility. He can reject the matches his mother selects for him and even threatens to embarrass her by refusing to participate if she proceeds with arranging meetings. This highlights a significant difference in how choice and autonomy are exercised within the family dynamic, particularly between genders. Interestingly, the gendered socialisation into interacting with people from the opposite gender is somewhat similar even in Hamza's case. He expresses nervousness about being seen in public with women due to potential community scrutiny and the consequent questions from his parents. However, he did not really fear any retaliation or dire consequences from his family, as felt by women in the victim-survivor sample. This anxiety persists despite his belief that there would be no severe repercussions beyond the annoyance of questioning:

> So before I left the city I was very nervous about being seen in public with another woman or another girl cos I always felt like I don't want someone from the community seeing me and telling my parents. And I don't actually believe they would have done anything. I was afraid, even though I knew nothing would happen to me. Well, I wouldn't get beaten up. I wouldn't get told off. It was just the annoyance…I know I would get a million questions, and I just wanted

to avoid that. And to avoid that, I very much kept my distance and was very private, in terms of seeing females outside of school hours, essentially. I pretty much didn't do it until I got to university where I kind of felt the freedom of, okay, there's no-one gonna be actually watching here. (Hamza, male, 30s, *community sample*)

His decision to avoid public interactions with women to circumvent questioning reflects an adaptation to his parents' expectations. It suggests that the mere possibility of being watched can significantly alter behaviour, even in the absence of direct consequences.

The community sample reveals that, while participants are familiar with similar gendered norms regarding behaviour, family expectations, and marriage, the presence of certain gradients of choice distinguishes them from the victim-survivor sample, making forced marriage less inevitable. Although women in the community sample may experience a lack of consent in marriage, they do not necessarily equate this with forced marriage. Instead, forced marriage is identified when the absence of consent is coupled with abuse within the marriage, as demonstrated in Nazma's case. Another difference in the community sample is that parents often prioritise their daughters' interests and well-being over their own, which contrasts sharply with the dynamics observed in the victim-survivor sample. For example, Zoya's realisation that her father supported her all along, despite external pressures from the extended family, highlights the presence of choice and autonomy within the community sample. Her father's assertion that the final decision rested with his daughter is indicative of the support some women receive from their families, which plays a crucial role in preventing forced marriage—something largely missing from the victim-survivor sample. The willingness of parents to accommodate their daughters' wishes, even when they defy convention—such as liking someone outside their religion, as in Imran's case—distinguishes the community sample from the victim-survivor sample. Imran's acceptance of his daughter's choice reflects a shift in parental priorities, where the child's happiness takes precedence over societal expectations. Another notable difference is the greater ease with which some men in the community sample, like Hamza, are able to reject marriage proposals compared to the women in the victim-survivor sample (as will be shown). This ability to exercise choice without significant repercussions underscores the gendered disparities in marital decision-making within these two samples (Gill and Harvey). In conclusion, the community sample illustrates a broader spectrum of experiences where gradients of choice and parental support mitigate the risk of forced marriage, providing a critical contrast to the experiences of victim-survivors.

Returning back to the victim-survivors sample, all victim-survivors became acquainted with their family's ideology of 'honour' in relation to either interaction with boys or men, or in relation to their

marriage, or both. As Harnoor from the victim-survivors sample explains below, her mother saw marriage as the 'ultimate goal of a woman's life' and prepared her to be someone's wife:

> There are two kinds of Indian families the way I see it. There is the kind that encourage their daughters to go have their education and then get married. And then there's the other kind of family that doesn't believe in that. They believe that their daughters are only good for marriage and they don't need to get an education, they need to go to high school obviously but then after that, their place is like with their husband…that they should get married as soon as possible. She should just make that husband happy… like do the cooking cleaning for him, have kids and that was like where my family…like my mom was exactly that. (Harnoor)

Harnoor's reflection highlights the persistent ways in which young girls are conditioned to view marriage as their life's goal with domestication interwoven into their conditioning process. This is a form of preparation for women to be moulded into their future roles as wives (Sanghera, 2009). This preparatory work also constitutes a divergent attitude towards women's education. Education is either considered to be inconsequential to girls' ultimate roles as 'wives' or seen as an avenue which will liberate girls so much so that they will deviate from norms of conformity. Education can be considered a risky endeavor as it facilitates independence, choice, individual autonomy, some form of social network outside family house, a space for perhaps exploring sexuality (Bhopal, 2000; Samad and Eades, 2003: 56; Begikhani and Gill, 2015) – all of which jeopardise their socialisation process. Aliyah's mother was keen for her to get married at 16 and thought that education would give her "too many choices" and she might potentially elope with a boy:

> If you give her too many choices then she is going to, she is going to ruin our *izzat* basically. She is going to end up like eloping, running away. If you give her too many choices, she is going to end up learning too much about the world and then she is going to run off with another guy.' (Aliyah)

South Asian women "Learning too much about the world" or "starting to do things their way" was considered a strong threat – the possibility of which is curbed from a very young age, as indicated in this research. South Asian women becoming aware of their rights, exercising it, asserting their autonomy, becoming independent and equal members of the society are all aspects which are kept out of their reach in this preparatory work in the 'before' stage. For the natal family, the worst thing a woman can do when given "too many choices" is having a boyfriend, or eloping with a boyfriend (Sandhu and Barrett, 2024) – as echoed by Roop below:

I wanted to do something totally different than what my mum wanted me to do, so that was the clash. And she wanted to control me because deep down she thought that if I start doing things my way, I will probably end up having a boyfriend and bringing shame to family. That is actually what I have done now. (Roop)

Victim-survivors described how, over time, the effort required to resist became too much, culminating in their eventual compliance. This aligns with research demonstrating that coercive control operates by inducing a state of emotional depletion that makes resistance increasingly difficult (Bassil, 2019; Myhill & Hohl, 2016). Harnoor's account below also provides a poignant illustration of the intense familial pressures faced by young individuals regarding voicing dissent towards matches brought by families. Her experience of initially running away and then being brought back to conform to her family's expectations highlights the cyclical nature of resistance and submission, particularly demonstrating that escape or other forms of non-conformity, may not always be a permanent solution when the underlying 'honour'-related pressures with marriage remain unchanged:

I had to go along with this marriage because I just realised that no matter what I said, she'd come back with different things like 'how can you do this', 'how will we explain this', 'we won't be able to hold our heads up to the community'...you know. So in the end, I just felt like so much pressure. And I also I was being constantly watched since I had run away earlier. And just these conversations and the pressure...I just felt like it was just too much, and I just gave in to that pressure. I was 18 at that point and still succumbed to it. I feel like when you grow up in that kind of like culture with lots of pressure and expectations, sometimes you're just not strong enough. Like, even if maybe you are and you can run away from it, but if you give in, somehow by coming back or maybe they bring you back....it gets to a point where you are not able to like keep fighting.  And I think that's what happened to me, I couldn't fight anymore. (Harnoor)

Harnoor's experience highlights how emotional manipulation and coercion are employed before the marriage to enforce compliance with familial and communal expectations. The repeated questioning of her decisions and the invoking of shame ("how will we explain this", "we won't be able to hold our heads up to the community") are tactics used to undermine her autonomy and force her into submission. The 'before' stage in Harnoor's case illustrates the mechanisms of control exerted by her family, including forms of monitoring and surveillance which serves to restrict her freedom and reinforce the pressure to conform to the family's ideology of 'honour'. This sense of inevitability, of being too exhausted to resist, underscores the insidious nature of coercive control. It is not just about

limiting choices in the present but about reshaping an individual's self-perception to the extent that they no longer see resistance as possible (Stark, 2007; Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2018). Notably, physical and psychological surveillance works hand-in-hand to suppress dissent. Exploring the 'before' stage thus becomes important as it sheds light on the relentless pressure girls face, the all-encompassing nature of that pressure, leading to exhaustion, where fighting back seems futile. Harnoor's ultimate submission to the marriage proposal is not a voluntary choice but a result of overwhelming pressures and exhaustion, demonstrating the difficulty of sustaining resistance in the face of relentless familial demands. The impact of exhaustion on agency is perhaps most evident in how victim-survivors described their ability—or inability—to imagine alternatives to their prescribed roles. This finding echoes broader research on coercive control, which highlights how long-term exposure to controlling environments shapes individuals' perceptions of their own autonomy (Aplin, 2017; Anitha, Gill, & Noack-Lundberg, 2023). The erosion of agency is thus not an abrupt event but the outcome of a prolonged process where exhaustion ensures compliance, making exhaustion a fundamental component of coercive control — operating as both a tactic and an outcome.

Victim-survivors in this research were either prepared for marriage as the be-all and end-all, prepared for not saying no, or prepared to accept marriage as a solution because 'they had done something wrong' — all of which bring to light the lack of engagement with the *process* of choice (Gill and Hamed, 2016). This particular section highlighted that South Asian girls are categorically kept away from the process of choice as perpetrators demonise the individual autonomy women might get from having choice; or fear that women will become involved in intimate partner relationships further bringing shame to the family; or enforce women's compliance and conformity with the family narrative at all costs. Deservedly so, the academic and policy template to understand forced marriage is increasingly recognising that consent and coercion are not binary notions but instead grey areas within which coercion is employed, and consent is compromised (Gill and Anitha, 2009). However, there is a need to move beyond the continuum of consent and coercion; to take a few steps back and understand how the childhood conditioning around marriages (who women are meant to marry, or not), 'honour' (which action or behaviour is considered 'right' or 'wrong' in family's eyes) and control (continued punishment for non-conformity) override the process of choice. This section compares marital decision-making in the community sample with that of the victim-survivor sample. It examines how discussions about marriage take place, or are likely to occur, and identifies key distinctions between the two groups. These distinctions include the presence or absence of abuse within the marriage and the extent to which parents prioritise their daughters' interests over their own. While both groups

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share similar perceptions of 'honour' and dishonour, the community sample differs in that parents are more likely to put their daughters' well-being first, which significantly impacts the marriage outcomes.

## 4.3 Becoming "good daughters"

The following sections outline how victim-survivors were conditioned into 'becoming good daughters' and the consequences of not conforming to this trope. I argue that the 'good daughter' trope forms the background to the construction of consent and conformity, in conjunction with the overarching presence of control charted in the earlier sections. What results is not only subservience but also resistance to the 'good daughter' expectations. Along with it, I put forth the argument that family and parents benefit from the 'cultural value of control' (borrowed from Boyle (2019)) in that it makes them appreciated in the community, not despite being controlling, but because of it.

Sanghera (2009) talks about the 'marriage CV' in her book '*Daughters of Shame'*. According to Sanghera, the criteria of a marriage CV especially for British-born South Asian girls included having spent at least a year in their country of origin, be domesticated to make tea, and cook, clean, and play with children to show that they would make for loving mothers (Sanghera, 2009: 118). Variations of this template of making daughters ready for marriage was widely experienced by women in this research. As already discussed, household chores (washing dishes, cooking, cleaning) was the first form of gendered socialisation experienced by women in their preteen years. The following excerpt from Harnoor's interview puts into perspective how normalised this template was, without women necessarily realising that they were being prepared to meet the marriage CV criteria.

> I was really trained well to know what my role was. I had the responsibility of… if we had guests, my mum would sit with them in the living room and I had to be in the kitchen making the tea, making sure to put biscuits on a plate, took them into the living room served everything. I don't know..it was it was kind of like a show you know, for the for the guest that my daughter knows how to do everything…my daughter does everything the way good Indian girl is supposed to do. I don't know like why Indian parents do this but it's kind of like they just want to show that their daughter knows all the rules, all their expectations... (Harnoor)

Harnoor describes the tea-and-biscuit-show as being "trained well to know her role" but I see this as a performative role of 'the good daughter'. The role she is playing here is that of a daughter who conforms, a daughter who can manage the house, in turn making the mother look good for raising a "good Indian girl". A good daughter knows her place. A good daughter never outrightly disrespects her parents, especially in front of other people as that is considered shameful, and puts to doubt parents' upbringing, i.e., parents' ability to mold their daughters to become 'good daughters'. In Roop's case, she felt the pressure to agree with her mother's choice of Roop's marriage partner, leaving Roop feeling disengaged from the marital decision-making process:

> I feared that my mom would probably not talk to me or disown me because it is like I am disrespecting her decision. I am saying no to what she thinks is right for me, and how dare I disrespect my mother in front of fifteen people. And I am going to look like I am not a good girl, I am not obedient, you know? If I am not listening to my mum and trusting her decision, I am not a good daughter. (Roop)

The good daughter is also expected to show willingness to accept the process by which her parents organise her marriage –arranged or forced. Ghazala, now in her late 50s, was ten years old when she got engaged to her mother's brother's son and seventeen when she got married.

> So we got engaged. We'd been promised to his [sic]... we've got rings. I didn't know who he was. I'd never spoken to him, I'd never seen him, hadn't even seen a picture. So it was... that's how it happened.

> ..when it first came, I was a... a bit shocked but I... I felt a bit grown up, you know, like, oh, I've got engaged and so it wasn't a big issue (Ghazala)

Young South Asian girls are subliminally and explicitly prepared for 'being married' and 'being someone's wife' since a young age, so they know what is expected of them and how they are supposed to get married – particularly the choice of partner. Ghazala felt "grown up" at the age of ten upon hearing of her engagement, not recognising that she is only a child who has not been asked if she wanted to get married in the first place. Ghazala feeling "grown up" and keen to show her other female relatives the presents she received from Pakistan are also an extension to the performative gendered traits representing so-called readiness as an outcome of the 'groomed for marriage' process (Chantler and McCarry, 2020).

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Another accompanying trait of the "good daughter" is that she plays a peacemaking role in the family. From the beginning, Ghazala's father was against the match not because it was too early but because he was keen on getting his daughter married to his side of the family which were settled in the UK, instead of Ghazala's mother's side of the family. There was discord between Ghazala's parents during this time. She also took a trip to Pakistan when she was 15 to know more about the man she was promised to, and did not return happy from this trip:

> …in Pakistan, in that time, I was taken around to all the family and I met everybody, heard a lot of good things, a lot of bad things. I saw about the family rivalry. There was... like everybody was, oh, your mum should have got you engaged to so and so. You mum should have done this. He's not... like he's not a good man. He's not this. He's not that. So I didn't really know what to think... there were a couple of times when he kind of tried it on with me and I wasn't happy about that. I was... it scared me. It was like everybody was warning me against him and I didn't really know why. It was just because of his attitude. Apparently he was not a popular person. He had a strict attitude and I don't know. I... when I came back, I was a bit... slightly scared of him and slightly scared of the situation.

Being a good daughter, she understood the pressures her own mother had from her natal kin. It started from the very beginning– from the time her mother started having children, she was getting hints from relatives in Pakistan to marry her children into their family. It was also evident that her mother was too scared to oppose the match or the proposal because to reject the proposal would have meant rejecting the natal family. The mother too felt pressurised that if Ghazala said no for the marriage, she would lose all contact and be sidelined by her natal family in Pakistan. This reflects a classic case of patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988), wherein the mother navigates her own precarious position in the kinship hierarchy by conceding to the marital arrangement—despite knowing the risks it posed to her daughter. Additionally, Ghazala's father's disapproval of the match was also dismissed by the mother because she blamed him for stopping her from bringing her family to the UK. This is a case where Ghazala was emotionally pressurised not only because of the trickle-down pressures of her mother but was also keeping the potential discord between her parents in the background– to appease both, she conceded and went along with the marriage, despite "feeling scared" of her soon-to-be husband marking the onset of abuse by him (as will be unpacked further in the 'During' chapter).

There is also cultural value attached to raising 'good daughters'. Boyle (2019) argues that cultural values that enable male perpetration of abuse against women often allow such behaviour to go unnoticed and unchallenged. Within the context of the MeToo movement, she introduces the concept of the

'cultural value of abuse,' which suggests that men who abuse women are often protected and even revered, not despite their actions but because of them. Building on this idea, the notion of the "cultural value of control and raising 'good daughters'" is proposed, where male *and* female perpetrators who enforce forced marriages are celebrated for maintaining gender hierarchies throughout young girls' early years and teaching them to accept and normalise abuse (Siddiqui, 2005). This concept applies to both male and female perpetrators, who benefit from upholding and enforcing traditional norms of gendered conformity (Siddiqui, 2013; Aplin, 2017).  From Ghazala's mother attaining more prominence within her natal kin for getting her daughter married to her side of the family, to Harnoor's mother gaining more respect for raising a well-domesticated daughter, there are benefits enjoyed by girls' families with the 'good daughter' image presented. Sharmin also notes that the way she and all her other siblings conducted themselves was considered to be an 'outstanding' feature of her father's 'upbringing' by the community, which got him a lot of praise from the community:

> We knew how to behave in public because the whole street said 'Why you can't you be like [her dad's name] daughters'. Everybody thought we were a great family- on the outside, because we covered up, we dressed a certain way, we conducted ourselves a certain way amongst the Asian community. (Sharmin)


There is silent awareness about the pressures to be a 'good daughter'. It links with the previous sections where it was argued that control is present in the lives of women before a forced marriage actually occurs. Essentially, the 'good daughter' is being raised to not say no to parents and accept inherent gendered inequalities. The pressure to be a 'good daughter' teases out conformity and fear of disobeying parents. Not being able to say no sat at the apex of the 'good daughter' experience imposed upon the victim-survivors.  Not only are young girls raised on control and fear but are consciously prevented from exercising autonomy in any form, as evident in the pre-marital experiences of victim-survivors in this research. They are predominantly taught to accept control, agree and not say no to the family narrative—which has serious consequences when it comes to conceding to parents' wishes for marriage.

The next warranted question is: what behaviors lead to the erosion of the 'good daughter' image? Much like the previous section, having relationships, not necessarily intimate, but even just liking someone, opened up avenues for women to experience abuse and manipulation from family (Sandhu, 2019), as they were thought to be behaving out of line, out of the norm of the 'good daughter'. Aliyah's father trusted her to never do anything that would bring him shame. She thought she was the 'good

daughter' as her father encouraged her to study, go to university, have a job, and make something of her own life, instilling a sense of individual autonomy and independence in her. Her father's trust in her made up for the support she did not receive from her mother to study or achieve her dreams. But this soon dissipated when she told him she liked someone from a different religion at university:

> So, knowing my dad is okay with everything I thought he would be, the one thing I am going to ask him in my life, he will be okay with it.

> So, everything he said to me now, I feel like did he mean all that? Because now he is just turned into this controlling man, 'It is all right, you can go and do whatever you want and have your own freedom' and now you are trying to stop me having my own freedom. It was very weird. And he stopped talking to me and he did not want me to marry this guy. I was really stressed that this dad who said all these things to me since childhood is now suddenly turned into someone else's dad. He just would not speak to me. It was like he didn't even recognise me as his daughter.  (Aliyah)

Aliyah struggles to reconcile these two sides of her father— one who allowed her to be herself and one who became explicitly controlling; because on one hand, she thinks she has the freedom and parental acceptance to like someone, but on the other, she is faced with a reality check where she finds herself not actually having that freedom. The fact that she had liked a non-Muslim boy was reason enough for her father to not see her as his daughter. 'Honour' is again at play because the shame she has brought is not expected of a 'good daughter'. In relation to this situation, Aliyah recalls her mother making the following remark:

> And my mum, said, you know, 'You are just going to ruin our *izzat*, you know, you are not following through as you are not a good daughter, What's the point, I should have killed you when you were born, I should have strangled you and killed you. I knew that you were going to be useless, you are not worth anything'. (Aliyah)

Aliyah had to end her feelings for the boy she liked due to her family's disapproval. Her experience of not being recognised as a daughter by her father is representative of, what I call a treat-and-threat behavior, underpinned by the affection and care-deficit approach of parents. It is based on the notion that if a daughter does as expected, she is treated according to the status of a 'good daughter'. Within the context of control set out in this chapter, when a woman exercises her own agency, especially concerning her choice of marriage partner, she is threatened with the likelihood of that status being taken away, and with it, the very recognition that she is a daughter, to begin with. The research noted

that women seek basic recognition and reassurance from their parents that they are still valued as daughters, particularly in response to harsh comments like those from Aliyah's mother. In Mehreen's case, when she told her aunt and uncle that she liked a boy, they manipulated her to visit Pakistan to formalise the union with the boy she liked, but when she went there, she was given an ultimatum against marrying the person she liked:

> And then when my family found out that I like a boy, they all had a big meeting– after which they were like you're not f*cking marrying that b*stard- gun was sitting at the table, gun was put to my head- "marry him and you're going to die". Say yeah, and you're going to die, say no and you're going to be alive. (Mehreen)

Women choosing their own partners is seen wholly shameful, as illustrated by the reaction of the families of Aliyah and Mehreen. The violent retaliatory remarks in the above quotes also allude to retrospective or potential erasure of the source of the shame and non-conformity ("I knew I should have killed you when you were born", "say yeah, and you're going to die"). Threats, deception, erasure, sometimes even disownment, are part of punishment for not following through the 'good daughter' image, by demonstrating agency which threatens the natural order of conformity, especially by choosing a marriage partner.

## 4.4 Beauty and the British passport

Sometimes, parents saw little marriage prospects for their daughters. This was because they doubted whether their daughters were 'desirable' and 'marriageable' enough according to prescribed standards of desired features in a potential bride: young, light-skinned and thin (Dhillon, 2020). These standards were relentlessly applied in the 'before' stage as victim-survivors often talked about their physical appearances, age and learning difficulties in relation to experiencing further pressures from their families to get married early. This section outlines how some of the victim-survivors were under pressure because of imposed negative feelings around their weight, age, or skin colour, intensifying the scale of pressures they faced. It later also demonstrates how women's British citizenship was weaponised by their families to increase their status.

Victim-survivors' age was often used to make them feel like a burden, with them being told that they would not be suitable for marriage if they aged. For instance, Roop was consistently told that because she is getting older, she is not a "suitable marriage type girl". This highlights how women are

undermined by their own families, emphasising their lack of choice as they endure negative comments about their age or appearance and its impact on their marriage prospects:

> My mum just wanted me to get married. As I said, that was her one aim because I was getting older and nobody would want to marry me, because I am not a, you know, suitable marriage type girl. And I was always told like I am the burden on the family, and that I am getting older, even though I was only 21 at that time (Roop)

Weight also added an important dimension to the nature of pressures victim-survivors faced to meet their families' impossible demands for perfection with the sole aim of girls' marriage. Negative feelings about their appearance and body shape can take a significant toll on women's wellbeing and self-concept (Rathor, 2011: 60-61). Pressures to marry not only strips young women of autonomy but also manifests in severe mental health consequences, with self-harm and eating disorders emerging as coping mechanisms in response to coercive control over their bodies and lives (Rauf et al., 2013). The fact that Roop was seen to be 'unmarriageable' because of her age and 'undesirable' because of her weight, opened her up to everyday instances of being asked to reduce weight, severely impacting her self-esteem:

> I wanted to study and marriage was not my aim but I was kind of forced everyday that "oh, you need to lose weight, because we want you to get married. (Roop)

Families also saw victim-survivors' darker skin colour as contributing to making them less desirable for marriage. This can be attributed to the wrongly, but widely, held beauty standard in South Asian communities where a woman's darker skin tone makes her less likeable, desirable and attractive (Negi et al., 2024). The comment below exemplifies how women's skin colour is instrumentalised to determine a woman's value within the 'marriage market', demonstrating how marriageability is often unfairly linked to skin colour. It reinforced the notion that darker skin is a barrier to finding a suitable partner, perpetuating discriminatory practices and intensifying pressures in the matchmaking process (Rathor, 2011), often making women feel like they are being forced because they are not 'good enough':

> I remember one of my uncles making a comment in regard to me "How are you gonna get that one married off, she is so black". (Sharmin)

By linking Sharmin's marriage prospects to her skin colour, it underscores how patriarchal societies often impose rigid beauty standards that women must meet to be considered suitable for marriage

(Nagar, 2018). This intersection creates a compounded form of discrimination where women of darker skin tones face dual marginalisation: first, as women in a patriarchal context, and second, as individuals who do not conform to colourist beauty ideals. The way her skin colour is talked about not only shows society's unrealistic beauty standards that women are expected to meet, but also what colourism does to women who do not meet the criteria. This not only leads to them internalising degrading remarks about their physical appearance but also inheriting the desperation their parents felt due to their weight and skin colour and cataloguing that as to why they were forced into marriage. Sharmin sees her skin colour and dyslexia as being a limiting factor in her suitability for marriage:

> Because I wasn't academically smart because of my dyslexia, my dad thought 'bloody hell, she's black, she's stupid, we can't even say that she's got an education'. So all my young age, I have felt as though I have got things stacked against me anyway. (Sharmin)

Sharmin's experience highlights how colourism and societal views on marriageability intersect, affecting her identity and self-worth. Shame, guilt, low esteem are also vividly experienced along with internalised negative stereotypes. An 'intersectionality of disadvantages' can be noted, where multiple forms of discrimination—colourism, ableism, and educational bias—intersect to create a compounded disadvantage. Her dyslexia, skin colour, and perceived lack of academic success combine to shape her father's negative perception of her worth, exacerbating her marginalisation within the family. The dismissal of Sharmin's potential due to her dyslexia reflects educational ableism, where learning differences are viewed negatively rather than being understood and supported (Sahu, Bhargava and Sagar, 2018). The narrative also reveals how Sharmin internalises the negative stereotypes imposed on her by her father. The descriptors "black" and "stupid", coupled with her educational struggles, indicate a sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Roop talks about how her mother too saw her age, weight, and skin tone as factors which might decrease her marriage prospects, simultaneously expecting a vote of thanks from Roop for using this as a valid rationale for her marriage. Roop's mother appears to frame her efforts to find marriage proposals (*rishtas*) as acts of care, yet simultaneously undermines Roop's confidence by asserting that she is unlovable due to her physical appearance and age. This contradictory behaviour is both manipulative and emotionally abusive, as it creates a dynamic where Roop is made to feel grateful for something that is being framed as a favour despite the underlying denigration.

> She wanted me to think that it is so nice of her to find these *rishtas* for me when she thinks nobody will marry to me ever, I am unlovable. That is my own mum telling me no one will

marry me because I am fat, I am dark coloured skin and I am getting older. I am twenty-two years old. Come on. (Roop)

The mother's tactics can be seen as a form of emotional manipulation and control, where Roop is made to feel unworthy and dependent on her mother's efforts to secure her a marriage. This undermines Roop's autonomy and self-determination, making her feel that her worth is contingent upon her mother's actions and community approval rather than her intrinsic qualities. Despite the pervasive negativity, Roop's narrative ends with a note of resistance and realisation. Her exclamation, "Come on," reflects her awareness of the absurdity and injustice of her mother's statements. While it is not known whether she knew at the time that what her mother was saying was wrong, it is important to note how she resists the attitudes of her mother and asserts her own value. In summary, Roop's account critically exposes the detrimental impact of internalised societal prejudices perpetuated by family members, particularly around issues of physical appearance and marriageability. It highlights the complex interplay of emotional manipulation, cultural expectations, and the resulting psychological toll, while also pointing to the potential for resistance and self-empowerment.

While certain aspects of a girl or woman's characteristics—such as skin tone, weight, or educational attainment—may be perceived as disadvantages in the context of marital prospects, possession of a British passport can nonetheless be a highly attractive attribute to potential husbands. Here, control over daughters' marriage prospects intersects with family's economic and social mobility aspirations, further entrenching coercive control within patriarchal family structures. Unlike general parental control, which typically aims to ensure a child's well-being, coercive control in this context prioritises the family's collective social standing over the daughter's individual needs or desires. This section analyses the instrumentalisation of women's British passports by their families to advance familial interests and elevate their social status. By leveraging the passport as a valuable asset, families aim to secure a partner they consider 'good enough,' highlighting a significant context within which forced marriages occur (Chantler et al., 2009).

The stigma associated with skin tone is intricately linked to Sharmin's British nationality, as evidenced by her reflection on her marriage prospects despite having a darker complexion. Sharmin recounts that, despite not meeting conventional beauty standards and her father's perception of her as academically unremarkable, she attracted multiple suitors weekly, culminating in a swift marriage within a week. This disparity is attributed to the significant leverage of her British passport, which served as a substantial asset in the marriage market.

Her British passport effectively compensated for any perceived deficiencies in physical attractiveness, providing a substantial incentive for potential husbands due to the opportunity it represented for settling in the UK. Consequently, while Sharmin's father viewed the British passport as a symbol of power and status, facilitating the arrangement of what he deemed a suitable marriage, it simultaneously became a source of pressure and coercion for Sharmin, ultimately playing a pivotal role in her first forced marriage.

Thus, the British passport, a marker of 'geopolitical privilege', paradoxically rendered Sharmin more vulnerable to familial and societal pressures, illustrating the complex interplay between individual attributes and the instrumentalisation of nationality in marriage arrangements, where the passport symbolises both opportunity and oppression:

> I had many suitors in Bangladesh even though I was dark-skinned, to come and see me, because I've got that really fancy stamp on my butt, which is I'm British. You know if you are British, and you go abroad, you can marry anyone really in Bangladesh because you've got that British passport- it's all about the passport. (Sharmin)

This reinforces that coercive control in parent-child relationships goes beyond mere guidance; it actively subjugates the child to serve family interests, denying them autonomy in ways comparable to recognised forms of psychological maltreatment (Teicher, Gordon and Nameroff, 2022). The emphasis on Sharmin's British passport reduces her identity to a transactional attribute. This commodification sheds an important light on the dehumanising aspect of forced marriage, where individuals are valued primarily for their ability to confer socio-economic advantages. As is evident, there is a categorical lack of genuine personal agency, as the primary motivation behind the union is not mutual affection or compatibility, but rather the socio-economic benefits that one party brings to the table (Gangoli and Chantler, 2009; Charsley et al., 2012). This transactional approach to marriage raises critical questions about consent and coercion, as individuals like Sharmin may feel pressured to marry due to the overwhelming importance placed on their nationality, contributing to her feeling of objectification. The reduction of a person's identity to their socio-economic utility fosters an environment where personal fulfilment and genuine consent are secondary to a family's material gain and social mobility.

Mehreen too describes that after her uncle put a gun to her head telling her to marry the man he wanted her to, the uncle, also her perpetrator, started entertaining suitors for her. She describes this experience as "bidding to buy a fancy little toy and everyone wants a piece of you". It commodifies her

owing to the fact that she has British citizenship and hence people would be willing to give more money to her uncle to accept her as a bride:

> No consent, nothing- they don't even bother asking you, let alone doing anything else and it just used to get to me how British girls are viewed there because it's like once you get them, they're like a little trophy that you walk around with in your house. And when anyone comes, they'd be like poodles running after you like 'give me your daughter, give me your daughter'. He needs to get entertained by it, obviously that's why he entertained them. (Mehreen)

The metaphor of British women as "trophies" vividly illustrates the objectification inherent in the 'before' stage of forced marriages. This objectification reduces women to symbols of status and prestige rather than recognising them as individuals with their own identities, desires, and rights. Such commodification perpetuates a dehumanising view where women's primary value lies in their ability to enhance the social standing of their families. The desirability of a British passport, which confers socio-economic advantages, transforms these women into sought-after commodities. The eagerness of families to secure a British daughter-in-law ("give me your daughter") reveals how nationality is leveraged to achieve upward social mobility and gain social capital (Chantler et al., 2009). The context of control is evident here with the lack of respect for girls' agency, the objectifying gaze they are subjected to leading to feelings of devaluation and alienation, and the overwhelming pressure to conform to these expectations (Stark, 2007). Mehreen's observation that the uncle "needs to get entertained by it" suggests a disturbing aspect of patriarchal power dynamics. The uncle's engagement with suitors is portrayed as a form of entertainment, reflecting a power play where women's futures are negotiated and decided without their involvement and consent.

Similarly, for Roop, a conversation between her and her husband's brother made it crystal-clear to her that her husband had agreed to marry her because he wanted to come to the UK:

> he (brother-in-law) said he thought it was a joke but for me because my marriage was already going down the gutter anyway. And he said, 'Oh, he only married to you because he wanted to come to this country and get visa. He had another relationship with another girl and he wanted to marry her.' And I said, 'If he wanted to marry her why did he spoil my life? Why he…?' Because he wanted to come to this country and have a British passport. He said, 'Look at you, you wasn't even good looking. You was fat at that time.' You know, all the things, materialistic things you can't change about yourself. And did I feel myself, I always have these negative things about me, I am not good enough for anything. (Roop)

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The transactional nature of forced marriages is evident in the above revelation. Women's British passports, and by extension women themselves, are commodified in an intricately controlled context where women are not made to feel good about themselves and their British citizenship is used as a way of 'making them look good enough'. Underlying power dynamics and control mechanisms are evident in terms of it being at the extreme end of parental control as it evidences their ownership of their daughters to do with what they want and make a profit and/or increase their status along the way (Stark, 2007).

> So, I heard him saying to his dad, 'Oh, she is a little bit short for me and she is a little bit on chubby side,' and then I heard his dad saying, 'Look at your mother, she is fatter than her, your sister is fatter than her. And your brother-in-law. Look, she has got a British passport and everything and you are not going to get a girl like her, you know, she is listening to her mum and everything.' (Roop)

Despite her mother's negative assessments of her age and adherence to certain beauty standards, Roop's British passport emerged as a significant factor that attracted the attention of her husband and his family. Her father-in-law's views on her perceived shortcomings ("fat") were overshadowed by the passport's value, which provided a pathway for his son to settle in the UK. He even sees the fact that Roop does not go against her mother as a positive trait, signifying the relevance of the 'good daughter' image. Consequently, the British passport, seen by Roop's mother as an asset conferring power and status, paradoxically became a source of disadvantage for Roop, contributing to the financial exploitation, domestic abuse and degradation she experienced in her forced marriage (as will be discussed in the 'During' chapter).

Despite the common 'appeal' associated with both men's and women's British citizenship, women's British citizenship is controlled to make it a transactional arrangement – arranging gold for marriage or increased dowry price to be paid to the family/perpetrators. An intersectional observation highlights how gender intersects with citizenship status to shape individuals' experiences of citizenship-related control in the context of forced marriages. While both men and women may possess British citizenship, the perception and utilisation of this status are influenced by gendered norms and expectations with natal family and marriage at the centre. This section revealed how women's British citizenship is often treated as a transactional commodity to carry out forced marriages. Rather than being valued in its own right, women's British citizenship is leveraged as a means to offset perceived deficiencies in other areas (physical appearance, educational attainment, learning disabilities). This transactional approach

diminishes the agency and intrinsic worth of women, clearly demonstrating how their marriages are forced in this context, reducing them to objects of exchange in the 'deal' of marriage.

## Summary

This chapter outlines what happens before a forced marriage actually occurs and the context in which control, fear, obedience, and conformity to gender, cultural and familial norms is instilled in girls' early childhood. Lack of individual choice, no respect for autonomy and no individual agency were notable parts of victim-survivors' childhood, in relation to expectations about their participation in household chores, limited educational opportunities, no dating and relationships with boys and men, and most importantly, no choice of marriage partner. While lack of choice was a universal experience in victim-survivors' childhood, there was an emphasis on the importance and respect of individual choice in relation to decision-making around marriages in the community sample. While this chapter has outlined how forms of control operate in the 'before' stage of forced marriage, it is important to acknowledge that many of these tactics persist and evolve in the trajectories of control 'during' and 'after' the forced marriage, as will be explored in the later chapters.

Forced marriage is not a single one-off event which occurs suddenly; rather, the foundations for lack of choice, autonomy, individuality, agency are laid down in girls' lives since an early age. This research highlights that gendered socialisation under coercive control bears striking similarities to recognised forms of child maltreatment, including emotional abuse, forced domestic servitude, and psychological coercion. However, it is distinct in its cultural specificity, especially toward girl child—where 'honour' and shame function as mechanisms to legitimise control, reinforcing compliance beyond the immediate family unit. The 'before' stage comprises of conditioning into control and conformity based on stereotypical constructions of femininity as subservient, obedient, and as a good daughter, 'future' housewife and mother (Sanghera, 2009; Rathor, 2011). The 'good daughter' trope contextualises the construction of girls' and women's consent and conformity. Essentially, not being able to say no to parents' wishes sits at the apex of the 'good daughter' experience imposed upon victim-survivors. The pressure to be a 'good daughter' encourages conformity and fear of disobeying parents, with young girls consciously prevented from exercising agency in any form. This has profound implications for understanding agency within coercive environments, as it suggests that resistance is not just constrained by external threats but by the deeply internalised effects of sustained exhaustion faced by

victim-survivors. The 'before' stage is also rife with family's relentless negative remarks about girls' age, skin colour and weight, which intensifies the pressures they face to get married. Finally, this chapter revealed how women's British citizenship is instrumentalised by parents to increase their status and further their interests, treating it as a transactional commodity to facilitate daughters' forced marriage. While British citizenship is seen by women's parents as an asset conferring power and status to them, it becomes a source of disadvantage, vulnerability, coercion and oppression for victim-survivors. At times, women's citizenship is leveraged to make up for perceived shortcomings in other areas: physical appearance, education, learning disabilities. By integrating a coercive control framework, this research challenges the perception that parental control is a natural aspect of upbringing. While parental authority is an inevitable part of the parent-child relationship, coercive control—especially when shaped by honour-based expectations—constitutes a unique and systematic form of abuse that significantly impairs the development of autonomy and agency.

# Chapter 5: During the Forced Marriage—Maintenance and Endurance of a Forced Marriage

## Introduction

The preceding chapter considered how victim-survivors are socialised into conforming to the family narrative of 'honour' codes, the conventional norms around marriages solely based on parental choice, the overall experience of control and limited autonomy during their formative years. For the victim-survivors in this study, loss of choice in deciding who they got married to and when, meant loss of choice in all departments of life following the marriage including whether they can: have children (or not), pursue further education, seek employment opportunities, save and spend their own money, build and maintain a self-chosen circle of friends and family, dress the way they liked and even keep the hairstyles they want. They grappled with the weight of marital dominance, contending not just with their husbands' controlling behaviour but also the absence of support from their parents. This lack of support left these women feeling isolated and defenseless in their new marital roles (Chantler and McCarry, 2020).

In the context of South Asian families, marriage is a union 'between groups rather than individuals', denoting how new and additional relationships develop between two families – the natal and marital household (Charsley and Shaw, 2006: 335). From the subjective interpretation and understanding of the victim-survivors, it is argued that the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms and 'honour' codes is evident in the way women are "handed over" to their husbands and their marital families (Reddy, 2014). The belief that a woman is transferred from the control of her natal family to her husband's family is deeply ingrained in South Asian societies. This has two further elements. First, a high tolerance for poor treatment and loss of choice in important areas of life which has already been introduced to these women by their parents, is later experienced in a similar cycle of abuse by their husbands and in-laws, curated and sanctioned by women's natal families. Second, it generates a system where South Asian women are subjected to gendered, social, cultural and patriarchal standards and expectations in their life span, by their natal and marital households, and also the wider community.

Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control is heavily based on adult intimate partner relationships, ignoring the complex familial dynamics racially minoritised women are confronted with before, during and after a forced marriage. The specificity of South Asian women's experiences implicates multiple perpetrators within complicated family structures, requiring a nuanced understanding of kinship

relationships, and structured and gendered dynamics of households (Mirza, 2017). This chapter provides an insightful understanding of how power is framed in relation to South Asian women's experiences of coercive control, which looks considerably different to its mainstream conceptualisations (Williamson, 2010; Stark and Hester, 2019). It further strengthens my argument that Stark's model of coercive control needs to account for the multiple relationships and complicated structures that characterise British South Asian women's experiences (Mirza, 2017: 407). This chapter makes the case for understanding the heterogeneity of victim-survivors' experiences of forced marriage and life during a forced marriage, thus expanding Stark's model of coercive control to their lives, highlighting the seemingly distinct but overlapping nature of control by different sets of perpetrators.

## Structure of this chapter

This chapter provides a detailed account of the ongoing nature of forced marriage. For the victim-survivors in this study, the experience of force or control did not automatically stop after the forced marriage had taken place; instead, different forms of control were enacted by different groups of people to make women stay in the marriage. Figure 1 explains the key characteristics of the 'during' stage based on the victim-survivors' experiences, encompassing the concept of a 'web of control'.

**The circular diagram contains the following text:**

Top-left quadrant: Global Political Economy of FMs

Top-right quadrant: Parents

Bottom-left quadrant: Community

Bottom-right quadrant: Husbands/ Husband's family

Top-left box:
- Transactional nature of FMs
- Women's British citizenship leveraged for socio-economic gains by parents and husbands.

Top-right box:
- Problematising the 'safety net'
- "Stay and make the marriage work"

Bottom-left box:
- Invalidating victim-survivors
- Regulating women's decision to leave the FM
- Lack of trust: 'everyone knows everyone'

Bottom-right box:
- Isolation and financial control
- Sexual violence, pregnancies
- Faith-based control
- "Nice husband" trope

*Figure 1: Web of Control*

In the context of forced marriage, I define 'web of control' as an environment where there is considerable interaction and overlap between various perpetrators of control and sources of support for that control which expose victim-survivors to ongoing violence and abuse within the marriage. The experience of a 'web of control' directly affects victim-survivors' agency, relative ideas of safety and help-seeking. An overlap between these layers of control can also manifest in the form of victim-survivors' parents exerting their continued control through the husbands (for example, evoking the gender and sexual norms pervasive in the 'institution' of marriage), or husbands doing the same through the women's parents, or both. Furthermore, other members of the family (natal or marital), the wider community at large, and more broadly the global politics underpinning forced marriage also contribute to victim-survivors' cumulative feeling of being controlled to endure that marriage. Despite these marriages often turning abusive and violent, victim-survivors are pressured to stay and enact the roles of 'honourable' wives and daughters by showing obedience to husbands and parents simultaneously, and 'make the marriage work' notwithstanding the cost to them.

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The web of control elucidates significant overlaps between natal kin (parents, extended family members in a joint household such as aunts and uncles), marital household (husband and husband's family), the broader community (such as people who meet women at social gatherings namely neighbours, family friends and sometimes peers and colleagues), and the global political economy of forced marriage which outlines the transactional nature of such marriages and normalises the patriarchal norms underpinning victim-survivors' role and status in marriages. The use of double-pointed arrows in the figure above symbolises the overlapping nature of these contexts. What this means is that parents continue to control daughters *their* way (i.e., never fully letting go of their control on their daughters even after their marriage) as they prepare them to accept control by their husbands within the marital household after marriage. Simultaneously, husbands' control can be multiplied in instances where women are not protected by their parents, with husbands exploiting the fact that the daughter-parent relationship is based on control and fear.

Presenting victim-survivors' multidimensional and multiplicative experiences of enduring a forced marriage via this model develops the coercive control approach by understanding the ongoing nature of control and power; which further takes into account factors such as gender, age, race, religion, women's relationship with their natal parents, 'honour' after marriage, distance from kin, relative ideas of safety, geographical location of women shaping their experience of control. South Asian women's specific experiences have been overlooked in the original conceptualization (Mirza, 2017) and hence this finding addresses this gap. These factors provide the backdrop for not just how control is omnipresent in women's lives, but also important to understand how agency is framed as a result of this. The web of control is underpinned by intersectionality as it emphasises the intersecting factors mentioned above and how they create structures of control during South Asian women's forced marriages which weighs them down and prevents them from leaving these marriages.

While this chapter foregrounds the specificities of domestic abuse within forced marriages, it is important to recognise that many of these experiences reflect dominant patterns of domestic abuse, such as coercive control, isolation, financial exploitation, and sexual violence. What differentiates forced marriage is the presence of multiple perpetrators, often including natal and marital kin, and the use of cultural and religious norms to legitimise abuse. Situating these experiences within the broader spectrum of gender-based violence allows for a more nuanced understanding without essentialising victim-survivors' accounts as wholly exceptional.

## 5.1 Contextualising control by parents during a forced marriage

### 5.1.1 Problematising the safety net

It is often argued that marrying according to parents' choice acts as a 'safety net' for South Asian women, sparking their interest and trust in choosing arranged marriages (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006; Bhopal, 1999). Theoretically, this safety net allows women to seek protection, safeguarding and intervention by their parents in cases of marital discord, particularly domestic abuse within the marriage (Gill and Harvey, 2016). The underlying thinking is that because parents were heavily involved in the marital decision-making and 'doing' their marriages, women can expect them to help, or hold them accountable, if there are any problems with the husband or in the marriage. Unsurprisingly, women expect their parents or family members to look out for them and positively intervene by speaking to their husbands about their behaviours (Bhopal, 1999), because, after all, parents' narratives center on '*we are doing this because we know what is best for you*' and, ultimately, women feel confident enough to mobilise this narrative even during the marriage.

The dynamics of consent and coercion in relation to victim-survivors' forced marriage were highlighted in the earlier chapter. Some victim-survivors were still children when they were forced into a marriage because their parents made a political decision about 'who' they should get married to based on what it will yield for the parents—more respect from their community, both in the UK and back in their home countries (*Sharmin)*; and greater acceptance and closer ties with their natal kin by bringing them to the UK (*Ghazala*). Mehreen had dared to like a boy and voiced her intention to get married to him, which was reason enough for her extended family to believe that she had brought shame to the family, and hence needed to marry someone of their choice instead to rectify 'sullied honour'. Some victim-survivors were forced to conform so that their mothers will be respected for raising 'good Indian daughters' who never go against their mothers (*Harnoor* and *Roop*). Some just see agreeing to marriage as a way of pleasing their parents in the hopes that the marriage would positively mend the child-parent relationship and alleviate parents' concerns/ anxieties about their daughters' marriage prospects (*Aliyah*).

This chapter studies the during stage of the forced marriage to illustrate how the safety net is a paradox for these victim-survivors as they discover an unsettling false sense of security, or indeed, realise that

they have barely ever been protected by their families to begin with. This stage is precarious and vivid because they are constantly positioned as bad daughters or bad wives, or both, thereby contextualising how forced marriage victim-survivors continue to experience control to endure that marriage and stay in it.

The safety net is discussed mostly in relation to arranged marriages because parental involvement in decisions around women's marriage arms women with parental protection and intervention in cases of marital discord. It can thus be speculated that women do, indeed, see value in the safety net, and see it as a future avenue for support, making their parents the first points of contact during marital discord. Sandhu and Barrett (2020) found that South Asian women who married according to their own wishes, and more importantly, without parental consent, stayed longer in those marriages when they became abusive. This was due to the inherent belief that, because women had gone against their parents' wishes, no one from their family would support them; they were explicitly and painfully aware of the fact that the so-called safety net would not apply to them. Conversely, it can be argued that women who concede to the family narrative about their marriage are more likely to be guaranteed a greater degree of family protection, as indicated by Gangoli, Razak and McCarry (2006). However, the victim-survivors in the research carried the weight of not being supported by parents even when they married according to their parents' choice. I argue that this stage makes apparent a realisation, both in the academic literature on forced marriage and in the lives of these women – whilst there exists an unspoken agreement that children agreeing to their parents' choice of daughter's marriage partner will be supported by those parents if the marriage turns abusive, in reality, many victim-survivors do not get the support from their parents and are expected to endure abuse within the marriage their parents made them say yes to.

The victim-survivors in this study routinely reached out to their parents to report their abusive husbands but their parents consistently normalised, downplayed or justified the abuse they experienced from their husbands/husbands' family, and actively insisted on their daughters changing their behaviour and enduring the violence to 'make the marriage work'. What is often amiss from the field of forced marriage is how parents and family members treat their daughters after forcing them to marry someone they did not want to marry in the first place. Not receiving safety and support from parents also points to the complications of who are being perceived as 'deserving' and 'undeserving' daughters. 'Undeserving' daughters include women who married against their parents' wishes and that remains the primary reason why they do not reach out to their parents for support when the marriage turns abusive (Sandhu and Barrett, 2020). 'Deserving' daughters, on the other hand, can be

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expected to be protected by their parents during the course of their marriage because they obeyed their parents and married according to their wishes—devolving the role of resolving marital issues onto women's parents/family. Yet this study found that victim-survivors are also denied support from their parents and, instead, are expected to endure control not only from the husband and his family but also from their own parents.

It seems that even after conceding to their parents' wishes/demands regarding who they should marry, women do not necessarily fit the 'deserving daughters' discourse. Female victim-survivors of forced marriage may not fall into the category of 'deserving daughters' worthy of protection during marriage because their parents prioritise the societal, ontological and material gains from their daughters' marriage over their daughters' happiness and wellbeing, as I will demonstrate in the following section. These gains can include forging closer ties with family outside of the UK by bringing them into the UK, dowry, reputational gains of getting their daughter married 'honourably'— all of which produce interconnected layers of control by parents to make their daughter stay and not leave these marriages. The risk of losing the gains from marriage and the stigma of divorce ranks higher than the risk of losing a daughter to relentless domestic abuse within these marriages, thereby explaining the longevity of forced marriages. One of the most distinctive features of forced marriage is the active role of natal kin in reinforcing control and legitimising abuse by the husband. This is clearly evidenced in the problematisation of the so-called 'safety net', where victim-survivors find themselves doubly controlled—by both their natal and husbands/husbands' family—despite marrying according to their parents' wishes. My research shows that this collusion is not an anomaly, but a patterned feature of how forced marriage operates in practice. While these experiences reflect what we know about dominant forms of domestic abuse, the added layer of natal kinship control marks a critical and cumulative distinction that remains largely undertheorised.

## 5.1.2 Reality check— Parents are not really looking out for them

> So, when it comes to conforming, the 'honour' and reputation of your family is more important than your child. (Sharmin)

"Concepts of male 'honour' and female shame and the required chastity and passivity of women, arguably pave the way for the idea that women are the property of their male relatives, passing from the control of their father to that of their husband via the social institution of marriage" (Reddy, 2014:

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29). However, during the forced marriage, victim-survivors recounted how they were conduits of parental or natal 'honour' even as they became wives. In essence, the women were strongly expected to continue to conform to the family narrative by behaving as good daughters who were passive, obedient, chaste, cultured and functioned in alignment with the gendered and patriarchal cornerstones of marriage. From the victim-survivors' experience, it can be understood that women's parents were invested in the continuance of marriage (Rathor, 2011) and expected their daughters to conform to socially constructed ways of 'being a good wife' because they continued to derive 'honour' through their daughters' marriage.

At 17, Sharmin believed that now that she had married according to her father's wishes, she was free. In a bid to put the troubling image of her forced marriage in Bangladesh behind her, she was determined to start anew— finally get back to the UK, live her life because she was finally away from the clutches of her father, lending merit to her thoughts that "the hard part was now over". However, as soon as she returned from Bangladesh, she was confronted with the reality that her father was still the dominant force in her life. Her husband had not joined her yet in the UK and she was briefly living with her brother-in-law who lived in the UK at the time. Sharmin's account below illustrates the constrained, disorienting, and profoundly distressing experience she had during her first forced marriage:

> […] my father came all the way from his house, probably around an hour away from my in-laws house- came to my brother-in-law's house and they were waiting for me. And I thought 'what are you guys doing here'. Looking at my mum's face, I knew something was wrong. I went to my room, and I tried to barricade my door, and my dad was saying all sorts of filthy stuff to me, calling me all sorts of names, trying to break the door down, saying 'this is it, it ends tonight' trying to kill me because I am bringing dishonour, and I don't even belong to you anymore. I belong to my in-laws. But still, I am shaming my father by not adhering to working and bringing my husband down, why am I drinking alcohol for and clubbing… he thought I was losing it, becoming all westernised…you know… going astray…bringing shame to the family. (Sharmin)

Newly making sense of marital and natal kin relations after returning to the UK, Sharmin was confused to see that her father was still dictating the terms of her marriage, while she thought that she "belonged to her in-laws". She expressed her confusion over the fact that her post-marital identity made her closely linked to her in-laws more than her father (Reddy, 2014), and yet he involved himself in her marital life because she was supposedly bringing shame onto the family, to him. Evidently,

Sharmin's involvement in drinking and clubbing— indicating a trait of being 'westernised', directly brought shame to her father (Gill, 2014). He became determined to control her by threatening to kill her and stalking her by keeping a track of who she met, where she went and what she wore.

Since Sharmin's husband was still in Bangladesh waiting to be sponsored, and Sharmin was engaging in so-called dishonourable behaviours as a married woman ("drinking" and "going out clubbing"), her father felt more motivated to control her. Being physically closer to the source of the shame, the absence of her husband who was waiting to get sponsorship to come to the UK, and the presence of only one member from Sharmin's in-laws, motivated him to take charge and respond to his daughter's actions. It can also be argued that because her husband and in-laws were not in the UK, the 'passing of control from father to husband via the social institution of marriage' (Reddy, 2014: 29) had not really taken place, explaining Sharmin's confusion regarding "who she belongs to" and her father's ongoing control in her married life, exposing her to more harm by her father.

Furthermore, parents might unequivocally control their daughters during marriage not just to 'mind' them, but more so, to 'save their face' so as to not appear as parents who raised a "'westernised' daughter" who departs from conventional cultural norms of family and married life (Gill, 2014). Interestingly, it is not that daughters are "losing it", i.e. 'honour', but more vividly, parents feeling like their family 'honour' is getting tainted through their married daughters' behaviours — the underlying sentiment in the above quote. This, in turn, clarifies that for parents, looking out for *their* 'honour' and preventing any disruption to *their* family narrative ranks higher than concerning themselves with the safety of their daughters.

It is also noteworthy that what her father considers westernisation is actually an extension of Sharmin's duality of identity as a British-born Bangladeshi girl. As a child, Sharmin used to remove her headscarf immediately upon entering school, and used to put it back on when it was time to get home. Unsurprisingly, Sharmin had ongoing experiences of navigating cultural complexities while living in a religiously conservative household and attending a typically Western school. A combination of culture and faith is the cornerstone of this duality because historically, parents have been vehement about children learning from Western societies at the risk of their cultures being diluted (Gill, 2014: 188). This includes children being asked to speak in their native languages at home, instead of English, or children wearing traditional clothing instead of Western clothes like jeans. Sharmin's act of drinking and clubbing are more nuanced than just 'westernisation', because it shows her engaging in activities which were culturally off-limits for her.

Her father considers 'westernisation' to be shameful because, in his eyes, he stands to lose a daughter who is authentically 'cultured', i.e., devoid of any Western impressions of social, physical, moral and sexual female conduct. It can be speculated that this shame appears to have a transnational dimension, as he likely feared losing respect in his home country for not raising a 'passive, chaste, and obedient' daughter, particularly if Sharmin's brother-in-law spread the word. Her father's continued intervention into her married life raises important questions about how patriarchal authority operates beyond the natal home, and whether similar patterns apply to daughters-in-law once sons are married. While Mirza's (2015) research does not directly explore how fathers-in-law monitor or discipline daughters-in-law—particularly in scenarios where their own daughters have married before their sons—it offers valuable insights into household power structures and gendered expectations. Her focus on marital kin hierarchies and mother-in-law violence suggests a pattern in which older female relatives take on daily disciplining roles, while male authority remains overarching but less visible. Given that my research revealed instances of fathers continuing to surveil and control their daughters even after marriage, it raises the question of whether this controlling behavior is later reproduced in their treatment of daughters-in-law—especially when daughters have married before older sons. However, as the narrative methodology focused on victim-survivors' lived experiences, participants were not directly asked about their brothers' wives or their fathers' treatment toward them (brothers' wives). This may have limited the emergence of such insights, highlighting a gap in the literature and a potential area for future research on how patriarchal authority is redistributed within households when daughters marry before their elder brothers.

For all victim-survivors, 'honour' and notions of shame became more potent during their forced marriage, showing that the ongoing expectation from daughters to always 'do the right thing' is a lifetime expectation. "Doing the right thing" is characterised by an overlap between conforming to 'honour' codes of natal family and being a subservient wife and daughter-in-law who does not challenge control from her in-laws. On her wedding day, Aliyah's in-laws and husband took control of the power narrative by holding up the wedding with her husband claiming that he was not being treated "like a prince", and threatening to leave the venue which directly invoked shame, fear and embarrassment in Aliyah's father:

> So he wants to be treated like a prince and because my dad didn't give that... so they were like, 'Oh we are going to walk away now then. We are going to go. If you are going to treat us like that then we are going to leave now so nobody is going to marry your daughter so how

embarrassing will it be for you if we walk away on your daughter's wedding day and she is not married?' (Aliyah)

Marriages in the South Asian community tend to be politicised across patriarchal dimensions of gender norms and includes resources (Rathor, 2011). The act of threatening to leave the wedding ceremony by the groom's family symbolises the supposedly inferior status of the bride and her family, with Aliyah's father becoming acutely aware that he has less 'bargaining power' in relation to her daughter's wedding, merely as a result of being the father of the bride. Both Aliyah and her husband were British citizens. The maze of social and cultural norms around marriage upholds a pattern of subjugation where the bride's family is expected to confer power, status and gratitude to the groom's family. Aliyah's father also realises that it will be shameful for him if the groom's side leaves the wedding without the actual wedding ceremony occurring— potentially leaving him, his family and Aliyah exposed to community scrutiny, disrespect, and ridicule. He concedes, but later warns Aliyah to not confront her in-laws or husband about this incident citing that whatever she would do, it will reflect poorly on the natal 'honour'. She recalls that:

> My dad said, 'You are married now, remember you are married now, it is our *izzat* you are taking with you, it is our dignity, 'honour', whatever you do will come on us. So, forget it, that has happened now, but you treat them properly and talk to them nicely because you are married now.' Just because my dad said that I was trying but it was very hard knowing what happened. (Aliyah)

For Aliyah, life after marriage immediately becomes a space where she is self-managing multilayered expectations to conform. For her, conformity essentially means not challenging control either from parents, husband or husband's family. She is made aware that she is representing her whole family, how her parents have brought her up, and, more importantly, her father's 'honour', in the marriage. The time during their forced marriage becomes an additive context for victim-survivors where they are expected to manage 'honour' expectations of their families alongside 'fresh' control projected by their husbands. Total conformity to the natal and marital kin is a disempowering but a vivid reality for women which is guaranteed to lower their status in the marital equation, making them prone to abuse. Conformity, surrender, sacrifice work together to dictate that women occupy a subjugated position as 'someone's wife' *and* 'someone's daughter', roles that precede their own sense of self (Sanghera, 2009). Additionally, these are celebrated and positively reinforced as feminine values which women are expected to adhere to as they become, as Sharmin says, a "part of a bigger chain within the community", tasked with the ongoing job of making their families look respectable in the eyes of the

community. To not participate in this collective and public enterprise or to depart from the objectives of prioritising the family narrative by focusing on individual needs directly means bringing shame to the family:

> So, your entire identity or your desire to be free is shameful because you are not you, you are somebody else's wife, someone's daughter, you are part of a bigger chain within the community. You even thinking about being free, thinking about having your own identity, your own dress sense is shameful. So, it's the power of shame how it leaves you so vulnerable for somebody else to coercively control you. (Sharmin)

In a similar vein, Aliyah's father makes clear that she should not become the cause of shame to her natal family during her marriage, and that she should not say or do anything which can potentially cause marital discord. The onus is put on her to 'do the right thing' while her father is shutting off avenues to provide support to her, despite being fully aware that she might potentially need it. This research found that concerns about 'honour' and shame for the natal kin were continuously used to push the family narrative to make victim-survivors endure and stay in the forced marriage. In a way, Aliyah's 'during' stage is characterised by her father using the 'honour' narrative to make her conform to the image of a 'good wife' and 'good daughter' and maintain the marriage so as to preempt his future reputational risks. This research discovered that natal 'honour' presents a heavy burden to women even after marriage and is a strong reason why women stay in forced marriages for a long time before actually leaving. Rather than viewing forced marriage experiences as wholly distinct from domestic abuse, it is important to situate them within established patterns of control, violence and coercion. This approach moves away from an essentialist framing that risks portraying forced marriage as an anomaly, instead recognising it as part of a broader spectrum of gender-based violence, albeit with context-specific variations.

One of the victim-survivors who expressed her decision to leave the marriage faced dire consequences. This strongly resonates with previous scholarly discussion around how 'honour' codes result in different forms of violence against women, such as the circumstances leading up to the death of Shafilea Ahmed (Gill, 2014). Sharmin's father attempted to strangle her when she was 17-year-old and pregnant and had come to her natal family to discuss her plans of leaving the marriage:

> Within a few weeks of me being home, my father tried to control my life and because he couldn't control me anymore, he tried to strangulate me while I was sleeping. And all I can remember is running out the house into Iceland [shop] with no shoes or nothing. (Sharmin)

Sharmin's near-death experience as a consequence of deciding to leave, or voicing her decision to leave the forced marriage, illustrates the ultimate punishment that victim-survivors can receive when parents are unable to secure daughters' compliance to the continuity of marriage. It is clear that all parents did not want their daughters to even consider leaving the marriage, with the daughter's life being perceived as a price worth paying in order to eliminate the perceived source of shame, as seen in Sharmin's case. Parents effectively urged their daughters to 'make things work', as opposed to parents speaking to the husbands. Divorce or any official declaration of marital breakdown is strongly stigmatised in South Asian communities with married daughters accruing more value from families and wider community than divorced daughters (Guru, 2009). This will be discussed further in Chapter 6. The totalising influence of the overarching 'family narrative', resulting in the cessation of individual agency and, conversely, the enhanced power dynamics within marriages are the leading causes and factors underpinning the perpetration of control by parents during a forced marriage, demonstrating how HBA and forced marriages relate to other forms of violence and abuse towards women.

Being forced by parents to stay in the marriage is also accompanied with being forced to adhere to patriarchal and sexual subjugation within that marriage which was sanctioned by them. Victim-survivors' parents' most common advice to 'make the marriage work' was explicitly underpinned by systemic reinforcement of patriarchal gender and sexual norms effectively underpinning marriages. This is inclusive of the formalisation and legitimisation of husbands' sexual access and control over their wives.

Harnoor had successfully negotiated not having sexual relations with her husband in the few weeks after her forced marriage until her husband sexually assaulted her. She strongly suspected that her father played a role in facilitating this because her husband had gone out drinking with her father earlier and then the former came back telling her how "he has every right to do anything with her". This exemplifies how the overlap between husbands and parents operates in the 'web of control' to create cumulatively controlling environments forcing South Asian women to simultaneously acquiesce control in child/parent relationships as well as intimate partner relationships, substantively chipping away at their own methods of self-protection and self-management. Harnoor told her father that not only was her husband sexually violent, but also that "he strangled her to the point where it felt like he was going to kill her". Her father's response is revelatory in terms of proving that victim-survivors of forced marriage are particularly devoid of any means of safety from their own parents—their first set of perpetrators —debunking even the existence of a safety net for them:

[…] and then my dad basically just said 'he had every right to do that to you. He is your husband'. I couldn't believe that that's what my dad said. […] he should have said, you know, 'Harnoor, so sorry this happened to you, how dare he do that to you. I will talk to him when he comes back." But no, he didn't say that. He stood up for him. He had made it sound like what happened to me didn't really matter. When he said that, I knew that was completely wrong. I knew it. I was very very disappointed. I knew immediately that if that's what my dad thinks, he's just not sticking up for me. (Harnoor)

The enabling thread between Harnoor's father and Harnoor's husband is strongly linked to performances of femininity and masculinity within the inherently gendered and sexualised domain of marriage (Sanghera, 2009; Rathor, 2011). The outcome of this cumulative control is representative of enforcing existing patriarchal and gendered standards to the marriage, equipping husbands with their 'marital right' of having sexual relations with their wives notwithstanding their consent. Additionally, Harnoor makes the shocking discovery that her father responds in the opposite way to how she had expected by not standing up for her. Her father's response unequivocally supports the husband doing the right and 'patriarchal' thing when she consistently rejected the possibility of sexual relations in marriage. Harnoor's case strongly denotes that lack of marital sex can quickly result in lack of sexual consent for female victim-survivors of forced marriage who are commonly expected to conform to husbands wishing to exercise their conjugal rights within marriage. She is married therefore her husband has access to her body. There is also little sense that the law in Britain making rape in marriage a crime has made any impact in these accounts (Bindel, 2021).

This section outlined how parents impose a natal 'honour' narrative and control on daughters during their forced marriage. It can manifest in women being told by parents to acquiesce to the ways of their marital household; punished for 'dishonourable' actions during their marriage by their natal kin; or forced into marital conformity by parents normalising gendered subjugation and sexual access within marriages. Natal kin are not ancillary or secondary to the ongoing impact of forced marriage on victim-survivors; in fact, their involvement, or lack thereof, in women's 'during' stage sanctions and legitimises violence and abuse by husbands or marital kin (Gangoli, Razack and McCarry, 2006). Debunking the so-called safety net underpinning the idea of "marrying according to parents' choices" elucidates how victim-survivors' experiences of not getting support or protection from their parents or natal kin adds uniqueness to their overall experience of forced marriage. The 'during' stage makes visible how they experience a 'web of control'— the interconnectedness of which is apparent in how parents' responses and actions overlap and combine with women's husbands' perpetration of control during the course

of their forced marriage. While the structural abuse faced by victim-survivors align with dominant frameworks of domestic abuse (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006), forced marriage introduces additional dimensions, such as familial complicity and cultural or gendered justifications, which serve to normalise and reinforce abuse in ways not typically seen in other forms of intimate partner violence.

## 5.2 Strategies of control used by husbands and husbands' family

Following an exploration of how parents play a role in the 'web of control' by exerting pressures on daughters and making them susceptible to further violence and abuse by others, this section moves on to discuss the strategies, patterns and behaviors of control used by victim-survivors' husbands during the forced marriage. This section demonstrates how Stark's (2007) model of coercive control can be expanded into the complex gendered power structures characterising South Asian women's experiences of forced marriage (Mirza, 2017: 407). The thesis is threaded on the argument that there is a lifelong nature to the control experienced by women forced into marriages. This section will outline the mechanisms of control used by husbands, i.e., isolation, financial exploitation, sexual abuse, psychological and physical violence, harm to children and faith-based control. Natal kin's responses (or lack thereof) and marital kin's (husbands' family: mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law) reinforcement of control are threaded through to showcase the operation of the 'web of control 'in the 'during' stage. The forms of control exerted within forced marriages often mirror coercive control in broader domestic abuse contexts, where perpetrators isolate, manipulate, and surveil their partners (Crossman & Hardesty, 2017; Hamberger et al., 2017; Dawson et al., 2019). Many victim-survivor narratives reflect classic patterns of economic, psychological, and physical abuse, akin to those documented in abusive intimate relationships outside of forced marriage. While these dynamics may be enacted by husbands alone in some instances, in the broader context of forced marriage, abuse is often reinforced or sanctioned by natal and marital kin, adding layers of complexity and pressure unique to such contexts.

### 5.2.1 Isolation

Within a few weeks and sometimes days of getting married, most victim-survivors immediately experienced isolation. Their husbands were deliberate about who the women kept friends with, who

they visited, including women's parents, and where they could or could not go out on their own (Lehmann et al., 2012; Weiner, 2017). Roop, whose forced marriage happened in India, stayed there for a while after her marriage and soon fell pregnant. Her husband disallowed her from seeing her sister in India. Ghazala's husband made sure that she would stay home at all times and disallowed her to go to university or work or even her parents' place not too far from them. He even prevented other people including Ghazala's friends from visiting her:

> So, we got married [...] my friend came to visit me, after about two weeks, and then he said to her, she's married now. She doesn't need friends. So don't come back and I didn't know he said that to her but, apparently, he said it to her, when I went in the kitchen to make tea or something like that [...] (Ghazala)

> I got a place at university and my... my dad always wanted me to go to university and I got a place and then he [her husband] wouldn't let me go. He said, you don't need to go. You don't need to work. You can be a housewife...you don't need to go out anywhere. You can stay at home and just look after the house and look after me and it was just down the road from my dad's place. He just stopped me going anywhere. I couldn't go anywhere, unless he was with me. (Ghazala)

Keeping women at home meant they did not talk to anybody and no one from outside spoke to them (Stark, 2007). It can be speculated that the perpetrators' motives act to acclimatise women to their style of control and ensure that they do not disclose that to anyone (Arnold, 2009). Social deprivation immediately followed for victim-survivors as they were tied to the confines of a house they shared with this new person.

For Aliyah, other members of the marital household also actively participated in isolating her. The excerpt below highlights how her in-laws employed the trope of marital breakdown due to external factors to cast fear and doubt in Aliyah about 'outsiders' such as neighbors, landlords and the wider community. Besides preventing women from seeing their parents and other family members, as seen in the case of Roop and Ghazala, attempts were also made to break ties between victim-survivors and their parents:

> And also I was not allowed to talk to people in the community. Like my brother-in-law used to say to me, 'Don't mix with people like your next-door neighbours because they will break your marriage or they will take you in the wrong path. Just keep yourself to yourself, and look [at] my wife, I don't let her mix with anyone.' And like the landlord basically they used to say, 'Don't

come in front of the landlord. He is a guy, he flirts with girls, so don't come out in front of him'. (Aliyah)

[…] they were trying to put me against my mum and dad like saying, 'Look, your parents are not good, they don't like you.' They were trying to break my relationship with my mum and dad. They were trying to tell me my loyalties lie with them not my parents now that I was married. (Aliyah)

Reddy (2014) frames marriage as a system which by its operation supports patriarchy, particularly in relation to how women are "handed over" to their husbands from their natal kin after marriage. Building on this, preventing women from interacting with natal kin can be seen as a 'power move' where husbands advantageously position themselves in the politics of transference of control, demonstrating their pervasive influence on women. Thus, whilst parents and natal kin were at the centre of the family's power in women's early life, the gender and power dynamics underpinning marriage facilitate husbands in thinking that they have greater influence over women than women's parents.

As previously stated, isolation strategies are, in the main, based on distancing women from those they know, i.e., their family members and friends, further weakening women's social network (Anderson, 2009). This substantially plays a role in a diminished 'space for action' experienced by women during their forced marriage due to weakened social networks. Kelly, Sharp and Klein (2014) highlight the importance of having 'space for action' and reflection during ongoing coercive control to make sense of the violence, potentially exercise autonomy and contemplate alternatives to living under the regime of coercive control. A direct outcome of social deprivation through isolating women from their natal kin, friends, and the wider community is a diminished 'space for action' to not only prevent women from disclosing violence and abuse in marital household but also to prevent them from making sense of what is going on.

Interestingly, there lies an incongruity between where women go for help and whether they actually get help from these sources, elucidating that parents are the first points of contact for women during marital discord, and that somewhere down the line, even husbands might perceive that women will sometimes be supported by natal kin. For example, Ghazala's husband did not allow her to attend a close family event, which was eventually challenged by her natal kin. However, when she did return to her husband's home, he punished her by not opening the door, neither for her nor for her natal kin.

This shows that despite a mutual control of daughters/wives by natal and marital kinship relations, husbands uphold the hierarchical power dynamics and supersede the control of women by natal kin.

> There was a time when my sister got married, he wouldn't let me go to her wedding and then my dad came to the house and said, you know, let her go. It's her sister. You... you know, I'll take her. I'll bring her back and he didn't want to let me go but he then... he did. At that time, he did. I went and then, when we come back, late at night, he wouldn't open the door and my uncle and my brother were with me and he wouldn't open the door, to let us back in the house. We were banging on the door and... and the ringing the house phone and he wouldn't answer the door. (Ghazala)

A 'power move' is clear in this interaction between natal kin being perceived to challenge Ghazala's husband's control measures and the punishment he metes out on her and her natal kin for challenging his decision. This case demonstrates that even when women's natal kin might want to take a stand in women's favour, the husband's structural power supersedes the former's attempts to implicitly support women. Therefore, the motivations for isolation are strongly linked to upholding the hierarchical power dynamics between marital and natal kin sanctioned by marriages (Reddy, 2014); weakening women's social network and potential avenues of safety/support; and ceasing opportunities to reflect on what was going on.

Husband's families also effectively enact control by ensuring women are isolated or kept away from familiar surroundings. In this research, only one out of the six victim-survivors spoke about abuse from in-laws. This has to do with in-laws living in the countries of origin. As is clear in Aliyah's account below, her sisters-in-law colluded with her husband to sensitise her to their style of control. For the context of South Asian women's experiences of coercive control, it therefore becomes vital to understand the underlying power structures in kin relationships and how that positions marital kin as potential sources of control within which women experience multiple forms of abuse by multiple perpetrators (Mirza, 2015)

> And then I heard his sisters talking in the other room and they were like saying, 'Look, tell her to stay. We will tame her,' as in how much control can we give her? Like we will have the key to her and we will control her how we want if you leave her with us. (Aliyah)

## 5.2.2 Historical legacy of control

Sometimes, victim-survivors also felt that husbands took advantage of the strained and controlling relationship between women and their parents. In Roop's case, her husband understood early on that her mother takes decisions for her (as she was the one who forced Roop into the forced marriage). He appropriated this dynamic into the marriage immediately after to mirror the way her mother had already restrained her and elevated that for his interests. Interestingly, while Ghazala's mother explicitly told her that she is meant to listen to her husband after marriage, Roop's mother and her controlling behaviors towards Roop right before marriage symbolically communicated the transference of control to her husband.

> I think probably deep down my ex-husband knew my relationship with my mum was not that great and he tried to control me the way my mum was controlling me. (Roop)

In this stage, women often made links on their own to realise that the control they experienced from their husbands was not necessarily new to their surroundings as they had already experienced similar control from their parents (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). This realisation is resistance not only to the socialisation process they experience from their parents but also to the continuing abuse by their husbands, allowing them to make some sense of their life (Sanghera, 2009). After escaping her near-death experience at the hands of her father, Sharmin started life afresh as a single mother, still not in touch with her natal family. During this time, she was forced into a marriage for the second time by another perpetrator whose controlling behaviors were not very different from Sharmin's parents' control towards her in her lifespan. She recounts making sense of these similarities in terms of the nature of control underpinning both her forced marriages:

> So, he used the same religious control my father and mother used to do that 'if you do this, you're gonna go to hell', 'if that happens, you're gonna go to hell'. So, he used the same tactics to control me, and I felt so vulnerable. (Sharmin)

In relation to recognising the historical legacy of control in her life, Sharmin indicates how South Asian women's familial experience of violence and abuse prepares them for further abuse. This overlaps with how in the 'before' stages, women were being prepared to accept and normalise control, violence and abuse, and not question it. There is a poignant invocation of "being immune to violence" as a result of the lifelong nature of violence experienced in their intimate and familial lives, which, as she explains below, Sharmin sees as resilience. This, in turn, emboldens the argument being made in this thesis that control can be a lifelong experience in South Asian's women's lives, as evidenced by Sharmin's sentiments below:

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And still as a victim of domestic abuse, you have normalised abuse. OK. Your father tried to take your life. So, I was immune to violence. A normal person would see violence as something very extreme but when you are raised in violence you have that level of normalisation. You could say resilience but actually you're not fazed by violence because you've been raised in violence. (Sharmin)

The overlapping nature of the characteristics of control by parents and husbands is a common feature of forced marriage. There is unintended mutuality in relation to maintaining gendered and power dynamics in the natal home as well as in the marriage/marital home. It is also noteworthy that husbands may not always be aware of the concurrent or previous or ongoing degrees of control women experience(d) from their parents, nonetheless the similarities in control measures are invariably identifiable for women (Crossman and Hardesty, 2017), showcasing an interconnectedness between their childhood and present lives, between their lives before and after marriage. Thus, the 'web of control' may not always work between parents and husbands/husbands' family in real time but can also crucially be felt between childhood and marriage, i.e. across different time frames, denoting the lifelong experience of control experienced by women.

In the excerpt below, Roop recounts the connection she made between how her husband's physical violence evoked a sense of entrapment that she was familiar with. Unintended mutuality also emerges here characterised by the ways in which women connect their experiences of entrapment in the natal and marital home (Chantler and McCarry, 2020). The link to the historical legacy of control is clearly drawn upon to make sense of the entrapment, control and lack of autonomy:

The first time he hit me in front of his sister and mum and I was pregnant that time, because every time I said I wanted to go to my sister's house or I wanted to do this, 'No, you can't do that.' And I felt like I am trapped here. The first time I felt trapped in my family, now I am trapped here. (Roop)

Before the forced marriage, victim-survivors felt trapped by their families, a sense of entrapment that re-emerged in their marital life as the husbands' physical violence and restrictions echoed their earlier experiences. This continuity highlights a process where the historical legacy of control in victim-survivors' natal homes seamlessly transitions into their married lives, perpetuating a cycle of violence, isolation and lack of personal autonomy.

### 5.2.3 Financial exploitation

A common theme across all interviews with victim-survivors of forced marriage was their experience of financial exploitation by their husbands. Predominantly, women experienced this in five ways: women's personal expenditure on husbands' visa sponsorship; husbands living off women's dowry or income or money from benefits; husband sending the joint income to his home countries; husbands preventing women from seeking formal employment; and husbands' ways of financial deprivation targeted towards women, i.e., not adequately providing for their wives and children. At times, these experiences manifest in a combined manner rather than just one of these ways being at play in women's 'during' stage of forced marriage.

Whilst being in employment gives individuals a sense of autonomy, independence and self-esteem, it creates distinct challenges for victim-survivors after their forced marriage with an overseas partner. Most victim-survivors in the study were expected to go into employment by their parents to be able to pay for the visa sponsorship fee for their overseas partners. Sharmin provides a historical context below for the logistical importance of working full-time to be able to apply for husband's visa for UK — a task prioritised by her parents predominantly to fulfil the socially accepted performance of marriage, i.e. husband and wife living together.

> As soon as I came to this country, there was a push for me to go get a full-time job from my brother-in-law and in-laws in general. So I needed a full-time job in order to apply to bring my husband to the UK. 18 years ago, it was different from what it is now. Now you need to earn a certain threshold of income. It's more difficult to bring your spouse to the country. But at that time, you needed a full-time job and you need to show that you could support your husband. (Sharmin)

Roop expresses a feeling of being stuck with financially providing for her husband while he awaited his visa. Roop's husband was not very well-educated and was not employed even when he was in India. Dowries have routinely featured in Hindu marriage practices where women's natal kin bestows the groom and his family with money, gifts in kind and symbols of status (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Rathor, 2011). Roop's mother gave dowry during Roop's marriage and since then, she felt that her husband perennially relied on that dowry. It soon translated to her distinctively feeling like her husband was financially dependent on her not just for visa sponsorship but also for the essential living expenses

thereafter (he was making these requests while still in India waiting for his visa decision), contributing to her feeling like "she had to look after him financially":

> He was relying on his family and all the dowry my mum gave them they just kept everything, they did not give me anything to bring back to UK. And then I said, 'Okay,' but deep down in my mind I am still not happy because I am stuck now. I have got a child, I was sending him money back home, every time he would ring me, 'Oh, can I have one hundred pounds, can I have two hundred pounds.' So, I felt like I started to look after him financially now. (Roop)

Appropriation of dowry (Anitha et al., 2018) is implicated as the structure through which financial control is perpetrated. There are gendered dynamics around money as a form of abuse (Rastogi and Therly, 2006). Conventional roles around masculinity are being implicated here as Roop takes on the role of financial provider in the marriage, indicating deviation from expected gender norms in marriages. At the same time, a contrast can be drawn that while she is the one bringing money (via dowry and employment), the power is in his ability to control the money and the decisions about how it is spent.

Roop was also unable to contribute her money towards buying a house because her husband routinely sent her money back to his family in India. Some victim-survivors also spoke about their husbands sending their money back to the home countries, curtailing their independence and financial standing in the marriage. When Ghazala mentioned buying a house in the UK, her husband and father-in-law instead prioritised the use of their joint money towards getting rid of his family's debt and paying for house construction in the home country. This research found that advancing the economic conditions of kin in home countries was a driving force behind husbands sending money to their home countries. However, this was often at the expense of financial exploitation of women, whose money is equally, if not more, invested in this advancement (Hester et al., 2007).

> I wanted us to buy a house and I said, let's save money. Let me get a job. Let's save money. Let's buy our own house and his dad said, you don't need to buy a house. We are... we need to build a house in Pakistan first and he has to pay off the debts of his wedding, as well and the debts of ... his sister got married the year before and he needs to work and send money to us and so we... it took us about three years before we actually did get round to buying our own house but we... he used to send money all the time to Pakistan and so we never had anything. (Ghazala)

This practice of sending money home led to husbands not saving much for sustenance in the UK, creating contexts of economic deprivation — a common experience for victim-survivors in this research in the early years of their forced marriage. When women started earning their own money, their money was not for their use because their husbands controlled how that money would be spent (Dutton and Goodman, 2005). Ghazala recounts how despite being in employment, she never spent her own money on herself and survived on basics due to her husband's financial control of her income:

> […] about two and a half years in, he did let me get a job… I got a job in the travel agency and they used to pay in like a brown envelope, cash in those days, and I used to come home and give him the envelope. He'd take all the money off me. He'd do all the shopping and he'd pay all the bills. I never had any money. I never bought anything for myself. (Ghazala)

While victim-survivors described extensive and prolonged financial exploitation, there was a notable absence of institutional intervention—such as bank or immigration authorities flagging suspicious financial activity or offering support. None of the victim-survivors reported that their financial transactions were questioned or blocked, nor did they describe receiving safeguarding support from institutions when coerced into sending money abroad or financially supporting abusive partners. This silence is significant, suggesting a systemic blind spot where financial abuse in forced marriage contexts goes unrecognised and unaddressed by frontline institutions. This aligns with Stark's (2007) conceptualisation of coercive control, where financial exploitation functions not only as economic deprivation but also as a form of entrapment, limiting women's capacity to leave or resist abuse. Sharp-Jeffs (2015) further identifies financial abuse as a strategic tool of control, where perpetrators manipulate economic resources to isolate and subordinate women. The institutional failure to recognise such forms of abuse, particularly when embedded in cultural or transnational dynamics, reflects what Thiara and Gill (2012) call the 'racialised hierarchy of credibility', where minoritised women's victimisation is often under-acknowledged by statutory services. Future research might explore whether safeguarding practices—particularly those related to financial control and overseas remittances—are responsive to coercive dynamics within forced marriages, and whether such interventions are accompanied by support mechanisms for victim-survivors managing family pressures and potential retaliation.

For those who had family members within the UK, economic deprivation and financial dependence was experienced in different ways. In Aliyah's case, she was forced by her in-laws to leave a well-paying job and go on benefits, making it difficult to experience financial independence (Sharp-Jeffs, 2015),

something she had valued throughout her formative years. She describes the impact of this financial dependence in relation to her child's essential needs which were not met by the husband:

> Because basically it got to that point where I was asking him to do things because I had no money in my hands. So I would text him, 'Can you please get nappy.' And he wouldn't get it. (Aliyah)

The concurrent experience of abuse and exploitation of women was notably intensified by gender inequalities embedded within global hierarchies of power. In the main, women strongly reflected on how their money was being used to drive the economic advancement of their husbands' families in their home countries, and the direct mental exhaustion experienced as a result of financing husbands throughout the majority of their marriage. This is an interesting finding in relation to coercive control because it positions how people who are earning the majority of money, or doing most of the economic labour, are disproportionally victimised due to domestic and financial abuse (Stark, 2007; Sharp-Jeffs, 2017). Draining women's financial resources, or preventing them from getting a job, or refusal to contribute to household expenses, or taking the majority of their income were very tangible ways in which 'feminisation of poverty' (Branigan, 2004) within forced marriages transpired. Retrospectively, four out of six victim-survivors resonated with the feeling of '*my money*' that was used rather than their husband's money. Sharp-Jeffs' (2015) in-depth exploration of the use of financially abusive tactics by men in intimate relationships can be aptly applied to the context of forced marriage, particularly when the husband did not contribute to household expenses or basic needs, or when they sent victim-survivors' money to the countries of origin. An emotional evocation of the costs associated with enduring and maintaining a forced marriage are accurately captured in Roop's sentiments below:

> There should be something or if they have a criminal record because of domestic violence in my case, they should have taken his sponsorship, you know, citizenship and sent him back to India because at the moment, he come here for six months, walk on my money [sic], go back to India then. He doesn't pay anything to my kids. He doesn't pay anything to me. And then on house he took seventy-thousand-pound loan which he never paid the mortgage. Financially, he's got, he took India lots of my money. I can't claim that. I can only claim what it's here, if I get to…I can't claim what's in India. (Roop).

The excerpt above shows the 'financial limbo' Roop is in, with no power to regain financial control with the perpetrator having taken her money to India. She also expresses the challenges in getting a financial settlement because the cross-border nature of their marriage allowed her husband to evade

paying her back, amounting to severe and prolonged financial exploitation of women in these situations. Indeed, more than just money is being implicated here. Roop seeks a sense of personal and procedural justice (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019) to acknowledge how she was forced into a position of supplication where her husband did not contribute to the household and living expenses, and solely exploited her money. Despite being the main breadwinner throughout her marriage, Roop seeks recognition of the physical, emotional, psychological harm she endured, and how she was expected to keep the marriage together. A new way of securing justice, which recognises how she is relentlessly exploited in the marriage through her British citizenship can be seen. This is reminiscent of dignity and recognition as justice – as part of the kaleidoscopic justice framework (ibid).

## 5.2.4 Sex, sexual violence, sexual and reproductive control, and pregnancies

Four out of six victim-survivors reported experiencing sexual violence from their husbands at some or multiple points of the forced marriage. Sharmin, who was forced into marriage before the age of 18, fell pregnant immediately after the marriage. Even though she did not explicitly discuss the sexual aspect of her first forced marriage, she draws upon her inability to say no as a direct consequence of being controlled by others her entire life, an experience she shares with all her sisters:

> So, when it comes to rape, coercion- we've all experienced that because we were all controlled for most of our life. So, if somebody is trying to rape you, how are you going to say no! (Sharmin)

Being forced to endure a marriage is closely linked to being forced to comply with patriarchal and sexual subjugation. Sexual encounters with husbands routinely brought to the surface the systemic reinforcement of gender and sexual norms regardless of women's consent to sex (Gill and Harrison, 2019). Roop recounts how non-consent often resulted in rape within her forced marriage:

> He didn't understand what no is, you know, and even if I say I'm not feeling well, he would say oh you always don't feel well. You know, he will, he will force him on me there's no point if I'm saying I'm not feeling well, I don't want to. But it is like…yeah, I would say now looking back it was more rape than sex, you know? (Roop)

Like Sharmin, Roop also fell pregnant immediately after marriage, raising concerns about consent for sex within marriages. Men's sexual access to women's bodies sanctioned by the sexual norms within

marriages was majorly at play when women talked about their sexual encounters within the forced marriage, speaking to conjugal rights within marriages. The experience of rigorous control in formative years to adhere to gendered notions of what is shameful and honourable continues to have an ongoing impact on women's intimate lives (Gill and Gould, 2019). This leads to South Asian women being silent about sexual violence because of the shameful impact of disclosing sexual violence and rape within marriages. Sharmin highlights the ways in which women internalise shame in relation to sexual abuse, at times for the sake of protecting children born out of marital rape:

> I didn't tell the police that my perpetrator raped me did this, that or my ex-partner, I didn't say all of that because it is going to bring shame in the family. And who wants to know that you have conceived two children from rape. (Sharmin)

Victim-survivors recalled their 'wedding night' and the sexual abuse that started either on that night, or the subsequent days. For Aliyah, the wedding night was marked by her husband sexually violating her and that predominantly became a painfully common occurrence throughout the course of her marriage.

> So the abuse, sexual abuse started then [on the wedding night]. I didn't know it was abuse. It is only now in the last few years I have learnt it was abuse and that occurred quite a lot through the marriage where I didn't consent, you know? And he would do a lot of acts, sexual acts that I, that is not allowed in religion, that I don't want to do was being done against my will and that is sexual abuse. (Aliyah)

Interestingly, all victim-survivors who experienced sexual violence and abuse within the forced marriage retrospectively saw how those acts were sexually violent because they did not or could not consent. As discussed in the previous chapter, as young girls, they are prepared for the purposes of marriage and their socialisation process is heavily based on accepting control from natal and marital kin, making it difficult to not only identify patterns of control in their marriage but also to reject them. However, this is not to say that victim-survivors do not show resistance to these dominant ideas of what they are meant to do in their roles as wives. Harnoor's case is particularly crucial to highlight self-protection strategies to avoid sexual encounters with husbands. As a result of imposed sexual and gendered norms, Harnoor went along with the consummation of marriage on the wedding night. However, the next morning, her husband questioned her sexual purity and character as she had not bled during the wedding night. Deep-seated ideas of sexual purity within marriages are reinforced by

putting women's so-called virginity to test, with the mark of blood providing proof of virginity (Shukla, 2023: 2335-36).

> […]so I went through with it and then the next morning, what I remember is like he kind of looked at like the sheets and there was no blood. He more or less said something like 'oh you have done this before', and I was like just disgusted because I told him that I was virgin which I knew I was. His reaction left me very disgusted and I was like 'right, this was a bad idea, I am not letting this happen again'. (Harnoor)

Harnoor's self-protection measure included sleeping in another room from her husband and not engaging in sexual intercourse till she felt comfortable to do so. However, a few weeks later, her husband sexually abused her and to Harnoor's shock, her father unequivocally supported the husband's act. As previously discussed in the section 5.1.1, her father legitimised the husband's sexual access as sanctioned by marriage and considered it right for the husband to be enforcing his conjugal rights when Harnoor ceased opportunities for sexual relations.

For five victim-survivors, this was the first ever sexual experience they had as young girls with no prior knowledge about sex and reproduction, and unfortunately it comprised of varying degrees of sexual violence and abuse. That rape becomes an inevitable outcome of forced marriage was a sentiment strongly conveyed by Mehreen, who escaped her forced marriage but indicates in clear-cut ways that women risk being raped in forced marriages:

> But I know it's very, very hard for someone to just go through a marriage, especially someone they don't like. It's like getting raped every night. But you can't do anything about it, you can't tell anyone. (Mehreen)

Victim-survivors' experiences of sex within forced marriages are common in nature and point to the wider discussion on how marital rape goes unnoticed in the 'during' stage of forced marriage (Gangoli et al., 2011). While many women are unable to disclose or seek support for sexual violence within marriage due to internalised norms and fear of repercussions, those who do reach out often find their experiences dismissed—where the perceived marital right of husbands is prioritised over women's autonomy and consent. Additionally, most of the sexual violence occurs in the broader context of isolation strategies in place by husbands, making it difficult to make sense of the act of violence, thus linking itself to women experiencing a diminished 'space for action' (Kelly, Sharp and Klein, 2014).

Sharmin, Roop and Aliyah fell pregnant soon after the forced marriage. Interestingly, all three of them were asked to get an abortion by their husbands. There was substantial marital discord between most couples soon after the forced marriage and women's families strongly encouraged them to have children due to the added value of having children in "making marriages work". However, their husbands did not want children. As victim-survivors rejected the prospect of undergoing an abortion, their experience of violence and abuse worsened with pregnancy and having kids. Aliyah recalls being deserted by her husband when she was pregnant:

> And then, I got pregnant, and he was not happy about this, and he wanted me to have an abortion. I said no and then he left me during the whole pregnancy. And he abused me a couple of times when he came back and then he would go. (Aliyah)

Women's decisions to keep the babies despite husbands' explicit disinclination were often met with punishments. It can be speculated that the growing fetus served as a reminder of women challenging husbands' reproductive control of their own bodies. Husbands' treatment of their pregnant wives also makes apparent their lack of preparedness to fulfil their expected masculine roles, denoting a substantial gender imbalance in men and women's conditioning towards ideas of family, marriage, settlement, commitment and children. I argue that for Aliyah and Roop's husbands, their decision to not have kids related more to not being tied down to that marriage, and by extension, to their wives. They viewed their marriage as a ticket to get access to the material and sexual gains from the marriage rather than committing to their roles as husbands and potential fathers. To evidence this, Roop's husband continuously relied on Roop's and Roop's natal family's money and it can be perceived that he was in it for the sole reason of settling in the UK and making money while doing that. This is closely tied to the reinforcement of the global political economy, something I discuss in section 5.4. Because they prioritised sexual and material access that accompanied these forced marriages, husbands were not particularly interested in caring for their pregnant wives, or kids.

Aliyah's husband was in an extra-marital relationship while she was pregnant and justified his act of sexual infidelity by positioning Aliyah as not 'good enough' sexually:

> And basically, I found out that he was cheating on me. […] So, and that was my fault apparently because I was not a good wife and I didn't give him good, you know, we didn't have a good enough intimate relationship [for him] and I am not good at it because I am not very flexible or whatever, I am ugly and disgusting…That is why he did it he said, why he cheated on me. And it is my fault he cheated on me, you know. (Aliyah)

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Seeking sexual relationships out of marriage, with a pregnant wife, can be seen as an alternative way in which Aliyah's husband re-gained sexual access (which he prioritised over his role as a husband/to-be-father). Despite his infidelity, the husband blamed Aliyah for not being 'good enough' as a consequence of being pregnant.

Roop endured life-threatening physical abuse from her husband while she was pregnant which subsequently led to her delivering a stillbirth:

> When I had my stillbirth, when he found out I'm pregnant with my second child, he was telling me to have abortion which I said no to. And that's why he started to hurt me in other other ways. Then I said to him, 'oh in this country, you can't have abortion'. So, he said, 'I'll pay money to you to go to India and have abortion in India'. And that's in the 1990s. And I said to him, 'okay, am I going to live with your family and your mom and dad gonna take me for abortion?' 'No, no, no, no, go...don't go to my family. Go to your sister house and stay with her and have abortion in your sister house'. So, these were tactics. And when I said no, I'm not having abortion, he, he kind of tried to do things which is like either hit me in my tummy or he doesn't care if I have eaten or not. He doesn't, doesn't care if I'm pregnant or not. He doesn't care if I'm gone hospital or not. He does not...like this is not his child. He just abandoned me and abandoned my child at all because I said I don't want abortion. (Roop)

Besides the analytical discussions presented earlier about Roop's husband's lack of interest or care or attachment towards his pregnant wife and unborn child, this excerpt also highlights the ways in which Roop challenges her husbands' proposition of getting an abortion. She poses further questions about whether she will live with his parents when in India for the abortion which he strongly rejects, denoting his preference for an abortion. It can be speculated that his parents might expect him to keep the baby and compel him to fulfil his role of being a father, hence the suggestion for Roop to stay with her sister. It is also paradoxical that he offers to pay for the abortion, explicitly indicating a sense of urgency around the need to get one, but it raises questions about his ability to actually pay for it considering he relentlessly relied on Roop's and Roop's family's money. Because he was not able to persuade Roop to have an abortion, his physical violence towards her during pregnancy is framed as a form of punishment.

Reproductive control was also a potent way in which women experienced coercive control by their husbands. A few days before their marriage, Ghazala's husband asked her to go on birth control pills as he did not want kids immediately after their marriage. However, during the course of their marriage,

he changed his mind, and Ghazala could not get pregnant per his timeline. There is a marked overlap between women's reproductive abilities and structures of gendered power dynamics which allow husbands to treat their wives as disposable to be able to 'rightfully' become fathers, even if that is through a second marriage:

> I had to have fertility treatment because I wasn't getting pregnant and there was all this stuff about, "oh I want to get married again. You can't have babies. You can't do this. You can't do that. What sort of person are you?" And then I had some fertility treatment and, on the twelfth month of the tablets, they called us in and they said, this is your last month. If this doesn't work, the next step is IVF and he said, no, we're not doing IVF and then he… he said to me, "if… you know, if it doesn't work. If you don't get pregnant, then I'll probably get married again" and like …what do I say to that? (Ghazala)

These experiences demonstrate that whether or not women get pregnant, their bodies are treated as disposable. They are punished for getting pregnant, and also punished for not getting pregnant. In Ghazala's case, her husband openly blames her for not being able to reproduce, which he attributed to her routine use of contraceptive pills—medication he had insisted on—despite no evidence linking contraception to long-term infertility. Her husband's consideration of divorcing Ghazala and then remarrying due to her inability to reproduce confounds Ghazala as she discovers that her husband can easily replace her for his own agenda. Overall, pregnancy, inability to reproduce, threats to permanency of marriage were all closely linked to create contexts where women experienced intensified violence and abuse by husbands.

In other instances, children were instrumentalised to inflict further harm to the victim-survivors. A classic pattern of coercive control includes perpetrators' violence towards the children as a deliberate tactic to control the mother (Thiara and Gill, 2010; Katz, 2015). Roop recalls how her children became pawns in her husband's control strategy, suffering direct abuse themselves:

> So, he started hurting my boys as well. They were getting abused. If he did not get anything from me, he started to hurt my kids because he knew if I am not saying yes to sex, you know, he is starting to hurt my kids then I say, 'Do whatever you like.' You know… It was always constant.

Exploitation of Roop's love for her children to secure sex compounds her experience during the marriage as she is forced to choose between her own safety and the well-being of her children. The threat and actual violence towards children are enough to coerce women into compliance, not

because they consent, but because the alternative—continued harm to their children—is unbearable. This also points to the interconnected experiences of women as primary victims and their children, secondary victims. Use of children as a means of coercion provides a stark example of the complex and layered nature of abuse within forced marriages. Children suffer direct abuse themselves and thus should not be seen as passive victims affected by the abuse only for the time being (Sousa et al., 2011; Katz, 2015). On the contrary, children can have long-lasting effects on their psychological and emotional development (Izzidien, 2008).

## 5.2.5 Faith-based control

In the context of coercive control, Mulvihil et al. (2023: 4) argue that 'faith becomes the totalising narrative which informs all other forms of control in the relationship'. Such uses of religion as a coercive tool have been documented across various religious contexts, including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, where perpetrators exploit faith to enforce submission or obedience (Levitt and Ware, 2006; Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006). My findings align with broader scholarship showing that religious discourse is not inherently abusive, but often manipulated by perpetrators to reinforce patriarchal control. For instance, Ajayi, Chantler, and Bradford (2021) found that Nigerian Christian and Muslim women similarly reported that religious messages—such as the need to pray or submit to husbands—were used by abusers and even well-meaning community members to justify or minimise abuse. This mirrors how victim-survivors in my study, like Aliyah and Sharmin, encountered religious rhetoric as a form of coercion used to enforce submission, prevent resistance, and frame disobedience as moral failure. This demonstrates that faith-based control is not unique to South Asian Muslim women but forms part of a wider global pattern of gendered control masked as religious obligation. Such findings underscore the importance of analysing how religious norms and values can be strategically co-opted to uphold male dominance across diverse contexts. This strategic misuse of faith is evident in my data as well. Three out of six victim-survivors recounted how religious beliefs were leveraged to suppress resistance and enforce compliance within their marriages. For instance, Aliyah's husband and marital kin knew how much importance she placed on faith and used it against her—not only to pressure her into staying and being submissive to her husband's family, but also to justify sexual abuse within the marriage:

> So, if I didn't have sexual intercourse with him because I would say that I am tired he would say to me that if I don't listen to what he says then angels will not be blessing me that night. If my husband is not happy with me, the angels will not be happy with me. (Aliyah)

The added dimension of religion and individuals' faith facilitates contexts for sexual violence and issues of consent. As noted below, Aliyah's in-laws equate being a 'good wife' with religious duty, illustrating how religious beliefs and kinship power dynamics intersect to position her as a 'bad wife' who failed to 'make her marriage work.' In forced marriage contexts, however, such control is rarely confined to the husband alone. It is often reinforced by multiple family members including the marital kin, and sustained through culturally sanctioned expectations, making it a distinctly collective and ideologically justified form of coercion. This cumulative and relational dynamic—where religious, cultural, and familial norms converge—is what marks the specificity of domestic abuse in forced marriages, even as it echoes dominant patterns of gendered control and subjugation.

> And my brother-in-law would talk to me [like] he was on my side and [say that], you know, we will make him come back to you, we will make him feel attracted to you. Then he threw in, 'Did you know that more women go to hell than men, because women are disobedient?' But it was like a way of flinging it at me without directly saying I am going to go to hell. Because his family thinks I am the bad one. (Aliyah)

Religion was also misused by husbands to their benefit and to effectively prevent wives from engaging in varying forms of entertainment. For example, Ghazala discusses a paradox in her husband's interpretation of what is not allowed according to religious protocols. This suggests a connection between structural power dynamics within the home and gender which are strongly implicated when considering who makes the broader decisions of the household. The binarised situation wherein he is against birthday celebrations but allows himself to sing and watch films are symbolic of the paradox underpinning misuse of religion:

> He knew a lot about Islam but he twisted it. […] In one sense it was so strict, oh you... but you can't celebrate birthdays, they're haram. You can't do this. You can't do that and then, on the other side, he used to sing. He liked singing. He liked watching films and he'd be such a hypocrite about a lot of things. (Ghazala )

Often, fear of social ostracisation as a consequence of not adhering to religious standards of family life were weaponised by husbands to prevent women from leaving the forced marriage. Sharmin's second husband used social community norms (sons not being accepted in mosques) as a method of control

to keep Sharmin in the marriage, indicating how religious consequences were leveraged by Sharmin's second husband:

> Because I have got two boys, he said the boys will not be accepted in a mosque if they know we are separated. So he still used religion (religious) coercion to keep me in his life, however, what happened was that I got stronger, and I started dating. So when I started dating the English man, that's when our life was in danger. Our life was so much danger- he started to manipulate and coerce the community to make it out like I am the bad person because I am going out with a kafir, a non-Muslim- to the point that things escalated very quickly. (Sharmin)

Religious consequences coupled with community perceptions about forming new relationships invoke facets of faith, race, sexuality and ideas of shame and 'honour' when considering who South Asian women should be involved with (Mayeda et al., 2019). Sharmin's husband's tactic is representative of an intersection and overlap between community and intimate lives, publicly invoking women's sexuality and shame for deviating from religious and cultural norms about what a 'good Muslim woman' should do. These are all ways in which community perceptions and religion were leveraged by her husband to position her as a bad wife, mother and Muslim, when she began to take steps away from their forced marriage. It is important to note that these manipulations do not reflect religious doctrine per se, but the strategic use of religious rhetoric by perpetrators to maintain control—a pattern consistent across multiple faith traditions (Nason-Clark, 2004; Ajayi, Chantler and Radford, 2021; Mulvihil et al., 2023).

The ways in which the wider community perceives and/or punishes women for engaging in so-called shameful behaviours denote the extent to which the wider community penalises women for not being religious enough, but also for exercising their self-interest and autonomy in relation to their sexual, gender and marital identities. Husbands work through community perceptions around women's status as single mothers and its impact on their children to keep women in the forced marriage, or publicly frame women as 'bad' (for dating white men as in Sharmin's case) to allow the community to shame women.

## 5.2.6 "Nice husbands"

Four out of six victim-survivors also allude to the switching behaviours of their husbands in front of the victim-survivors' family members and wider community members. Husbands construct their

reputation as "nice" and this effectively impacted women's ability to seek help from their family members and the wider community. Victim-survivors strongly felt a contrast in husbands' public and private behaviours and performances and were painfully aware of the real side of their husbands. Some of the ways in which the trope of "nice husbands" was projected by husbands included saying "nice", "caring" and "loving" words to their wives in front of women's families. During the forced marriage, women endured varying degrees and forms of violence and abuse by their husbands as outlined above. The employment of the "nice husband" trope outside private spaces was a way for husbands to weaken women's stand if they sought help from their family. It also served to enable the overlap between the husbands' and women's family as the latter re-advised women to try harder to make the marriage work or invalidated their underlying concerns about husbands' controlling behaviours. This is exemplified in Roop's case where, as a result of the "nice husband" performance, her mother blamed Roop for being the cause of marital issues. More importantly, acts of agency are at play here as Roop challenged her mother's victim-blaming attitude by indicating that her husband is not able to financially provide for the family (Mirza, 2017).

> In front of my family he was saying, 'Oh, leave this job, you don't need to work, I can support you.'' It is like at home he was a monster and with my family or anybody he just switched, like he is such a loving husband and he will show them, 'Oh, I don't want her to work, I don't want her to study, she needs to look after herself and her kids.' But deep down I knew why I am working, why I am studying because I wanted to leave him. Without a job there is no way I was going to leave him. So, you know, then my family started putting pressure on me, 'Oh, if he is arguing with you because of you are not listening to him.' And I said, 'How can I listen to him when he is not even providing for me.' 'Look how much he loves you, look how much…' you know? But I knew that was all fake, it was to show people. (Roop)

The "nice husband" trope enables husbands to control the narrative of perpetration during the forced marriage where their versions of truth are taken as *the* truth (Gangoli and Hester, 2023). Most victim-survivors independently saw past this 'fakeness' despite their families believing that their husbands are 'loving'. Instead of striving to dismantle this trope, Roop strategised to finish her degree in secret and secure a job, and then leave her husband. This research found that it was very difficult for victim-survivors to make their families see the real side of their husbands, and the employment of the "nice husband" trope further undermined their attempts to do so. Concurrently, it also highlights how husbands successfully influence the natal kin to regulate and discipline their daughters to make the marriage work, in turn demonstrating how husbands work through women's natal family resulting in

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women cumulatively feeling unsupported, unseen and unheard. This also ties in with the discussion of the so-called safety net presented earlier, further proving that women's parents pressurise them to make the marriage work instead of confronting husbands' controlling behaviours.

Other ways in which "nice husbands" switched their performance on in the presence of women's family members included encouraging behaviours they strongly discouraged behind closed doors (Stark and Hester, 2019). Ghazala recounts that:

> I wasn't allowed to cut my hair. I wasn't allowed to have a fringe. I used to have a fringe, before I got married, he made me grow it and I had to have like plaits in my hair or plait in my hair and always had my hair covered and she'd [her sister] have a... a perm and he'd come in, "oh you're... you're... you look so beautiful. That hair looks so lovely". I'd look at him and think, you know, you're saying that to my sister, but I'm not allowed to do anything like that. She used to get on with him quite well and he'd always compliment her about her clothes, whereas me, I used to sew my own clothes and every time I made a new suit, he'd make me wear it and stand in front of him and turn round, so he could see if there was any skin exposed anywhere and if he didn't like it, he'd make me take it off. (Ghazala)

Ghazala's 'during' stage comprised of control to the point where her husband controlled how she looked and what she wore (Stark, 2007). Making victim-survivors cover up or preventing them from wearing western clothing or even remotely looking western can be seen as a strategy of control to attune them to husbands' ideas about modesty. The "nice husband" trope manifests here to indicate that he approves and admires certain hairstyles and clothes, and as a result, fingers cannot be pointed at him for the way that Ghazala dresses or looks. He is able to come across as 'likeable' and 'democratic' in his compliments to Ghazala's sister and preemptively presents a perception of himself as a husband who lets his wife keep a fringe, for example, but she chooses not to. The result of this tactic is that he uses the opportunity to connect with family members who will inevitably believe him to be a 'loving' husband, ceasing any opportunity for Ghazala to be believed if she told them the truth.

The influence of the "nice husband" trope sometimes transcended women's families and permeated through the community too. Aliyah reflects on how her husband and his family took deliberate measures to construct a well-reputed image of themselves in the community:

> They put out like, 'We are so innocent, we are such good...' he would show like he is so nice and, you know, butter would not melt in his mouth and that, you know, he can't even hit a fly. All the smiling and all the rights words. They used to, like, 'Yes, uncle,' and, you know, this and

that. And then when the people used to leave the room they used to talk and say, 'Oh god, he is annoying me. Let's go, let's leave.' And they did leave by making the most buy-able excuses. They used to put this picture up, this façade, so people would not have believed me. (Aliyah)

The "nice husband" trope was seen as a significant barrier to help-seeking by Aliyah because she feared that if she reached out to anyone from the community for help, she would not be believed due to the 'innocent' reputation of her husband and his family. The connection between reputation of the husband/husband's family and the resulting expectation of disbelief from the community indicates the groundwork laid out by perpetrators to undermine victim-survivors if they spoke to anyone about the violence and abuse in their private lives. The public nature of the "nice husband" trope relates not only to these contrasting characteristics enacted in public (i.e., outside private lives) but also the preemptive attempts made by husbands to sway those actors in public (women's family members and wider community) in their favour when they get accused of violence (Siddiqui, 2005). Their versions of truth are taken on face value and as the truth. Preemptively controlling the narrative of perpetration of abuse draws attention to the power dynamics within kinship relationships which allow "nice husbands" to go unchallenged whilst weakening victim-survivors' will to call them out and making them stay.

## 5.3 Community

After outlining husbands' and husbands' family's coercive strategies in the 'during' stage to control and keep victim-survivors in the forced marriage, this section moves on to contextualise how the wider community is involved in victim-survivors' cumulative experience of feeling compelled to stay in the forced marriage. The previous section demonstrated how the community at large, and responses and perceptions of the community are weaponised by husbands to override women's decisions to leave. The overlap between husbands and communities was presented in the previous sections to showcase how the former operated through the latter. In this section, I present findings relating to how the wider community can be directly involved in victim-survivors' experiences of violence and abuse during their forced marriage. This research finds that community is directly involved in making women stay in forced marriages by dismissing their accounts; blaming them for even contemplating leaving; and sometimes even turning on them, worsening their experience of control within the marriage.

This research conceptualises 'wider community' to include people that victim-survivors 'knew of' as a result of seeing them often but who were not necessarily blood relatives. This includes faith leaders, corner shop uncles and aunts, colleagues, family friends, neighbors, and their own social group of

friends too. Often, victim-survivors conceptualised the geographical area in which they lived to be a 'community' owing to the varying degrees of familiarity between members of the community. For example, Sharmin sought help from a local charity for racially minoritsed women in her community and considered the staff workers there as 'community', because they resided in the same geographical area and were racially minoritised themselves. As she was contemplating leaving her husband, Sharmin encountered perpetrator-centric narratives from the local charity which put her husband on a pedestal (in alignment with the trope of "nice husbands" discussed previously) and closed off opportunities for her to actually leave:

> The fact that you're a single mom and he took you in, a Muslim man took you in, and now that you have two more kids with the Muslim man, you should be grateful. So even going to my own community for support…[it] wasn't there. (Sharmin)

Not only was the wider community unreceptive and disinclined when confronted with women's decisions to leave their husbands; they also attempted to regulate women's decisions to leave. When Ghazala finally decided to leave her husband, her husband's emotional state deteriorated and impacted his work, and he told his employer that it was because Ghazala was planning to leave him. What unfolded was a conversation with Ghazala where the employer invoked notions of shame by saying that she would be in the wrong for leaving an ill husband:

> I kind of knew them [office colleagues] to say hello to but I didn't really know them, and they were giving me marriage advice and stuff like that. I didn't think it at the time but afterwards, I thought, he [the employer] was like putting pressure on me to not leave him [her husband], like 'all these people are watching you and you're going to be in the wrong if you leave him. He's, you know, ill or whatever he is and I'm causing that illness'. (Ghazala)

The underlying implication of women being responsible for their husbands' wellbeing reflects entrenched gendered norms within marriage, wherein wives are expected to assume the role of lifelong caregivers for their husbands (Rathor, 2011). Deviating from this role, particularly during critical stages of the husbands' lives, can result in severe and unforgiving repercussions from the vigilant community (Mayeda et al., 2019). This expectation underscores a deeply ingrained societal belief in the naturalisation of women's caregiving roles. Moreover, the "nice husbands" trope operates to reinforce the husbands' narratives, positioning them favourably within the community. By reaching out to the community first, husbands can shape perceptions and garner support, thereby solidifying their structural power in the intimate sphere of marriage. This dynamic effectively marginalises

women's voices and experiences, rendering their positions and perspectives invisible in the broader narrative. The community's endorsement of the husbands' accounts further perpetuates the systemic dismissal of women's autonomy and agency, highlighting a significant gendered imbalance in marital relationships. This exemplifies how the interplay between husbands and community happens to further prevent women from leaving forced marriages.

In essence, the community was not seen as a trusting domain by victim-survivors due to ideas of shame around leaving their so-called nice husbands. When it came to female members of the community, victim-survivors experienced betrayal from them, further making it difficult for them to trust anybody in the community. Aliyah reflects on how an encounter with a family friend proved to be a mutual space for sharing lived experiences of domestic abuse but she did not get her support in helping her in a situation where her son was kept away from her by her in-laws. It can be speculated that deep down, Aliyah felt that because they had an emotional moment where they each disclosed domestic abuse, the family friend might at least help her indirectly in getting her son back:

> So they had my son and they kicked me out of the flat so then I went for a walk and I thought I can't ring the police because my son is with them, like he was a tiny baby. I walked out and then I saw his sister's friend and she knows what was going on. And I was like, 'Shall I tell her, shall I now? Like would she do something?' and I thought, 'I am just going to have to chance it.' And she started telling me that her husband was treating her badly and I just said, 'Why do they do that?' And I said this is what has happened to me.' And she goes to me, you know, 'Once a guy reaches a certain point, when they go over the boundary they are not in fear of any god or any higher being.' I went for a long walk right, and I was thinking, 'What can I do, what can I do, what can I do?' She went and told the sister. So, you can't trust, how do you know if you can trust anyone? That is why I didn't reach out to the community, you know? (Aliyah)

The refusal of community members—especially women—to believe or act on a victim-survivor's narrative may not always reflect malice or indifference, but rather a form of self-preservation. In communities where gendered hierarchies are normalised, acknowledging another woman's abuse can force individuals to confront their own disempowerment or the fragility of the social norms they live by (Gottlieb and Campbell, 2020). This form of denial becomes a strategy to keep their personal and domestic realities unchallenged. Such dynamics often play out in the public-private divide, where women may privately relate to or recognise abuse, but publicly distance themselves from the survivor to avoid social repercussions or protect their own roles as 'respectable' wives, mothers, or daughters-

in-law. The case of Aliyah's interaction with a family friend—who disclosed her own abuse but still betrayed her trust—illustrates how internalised patriarchy and fear of communal backlash can prevent solidarity, leading instead to a reinforcement of silence and conformity. In a way, it denotes the success of the patriarchal discourse of 'family first, individual last'.

This chapter, like Chapters 4 and 6, reflects a biographical and life-course approach, focusing on the continuum of coercion and control experienced by victim-survivors at different points in their lives. While this chapter does not engage with women's experiences in later life stages or subsequent relationships in depth, Chapter 6 offers a detailed account of what happens after women leave forced marriages—specifically at the intersection of their relationships with marital kin, ex-husbands, and the wider community. The relative absence of extended life-stage narratives elsewhere is reflective of the narrative interviewing approach, which centred on women's experiences with their natal families, their marriages, and the immediate aftermath of leaving. While this may limit the breadth of insight into later life stages, it reflects a conscious methodological choice to prioritise the depth and coherence of women's narrated experiences as they themselves framed them.

## 5.4 "Transaction has been made": Global political economy of forced marriage

Two victim-survivors faced considerable pressures to remain in the forced marriage due to the transnational mobility and economic gains implicitly or explicitly promised by their parents to the husband. A key finding of this research is its demonstration of the global political economy dynamics that underpin the use of forced marriage as a tool to facilitate migration and provide economic support to families in home countries. This finding builds on Chantler et al. (2009: 606), highlighting the persistence of structural issues like global power asymmetries at the intersection of gender, economic status, kinship relations, and women's British citizenship. It reveals that women are unable to exit forced marriages because the socioeconomic benefits through women's citizenship promised to the husband are prioritised over women's wellbeing within the marriage, compounding their experience of multidirectional control during the forced marriage. Therefore, along with women's parents, husbands and husbands' family, and the wider community – the macro-level global power asymmetries can form the basis of control and abuse women experience when in a forced marriage. The 'before' chapter demonstrated how women are commodified, with their British citizenship serving as instruments in transactional arrangements between families to secure another person's entry into

the UK or to enhance their parents' social and political capital by fortifying kinship ties in their countries of origin. Building on that, this section focuses on the varying social and economic benefits at stake from the intertwined processes of migration and marriage, for the natal and marital kin, consequently worsening women's experiences of abuse within forced marriages.

Notwithstanding the diversity of marital practices involving migration and the continued regulation of spousal migration into the UK disproportionately affecting South Asian couples (see Charsley and Benson, 2012), this finding relates more to forced marriages where facilitating immigration or settlement of the non-UK spouse was a key aim for all actors involved, except for the women. While Qureshi, Charsley, and Shaw (2014) highlight how women's British citizenship can in some cases unsettle gendered hierarchies—enabling women to retain parental backing or by granting migrant men dependent status and thereby disrupting conventional male dominance in marriage— this was not the case in my study. My findings suggest that British-born South Asian women's citizenship was largely instrumentalised by both natal and marital kin to facilitate the migration of husbands and reinforce control over the women themselves. This distinction is important for the broader conversation on migration and marriage: while some literature shows moments of agency and disruption of gendered norms through women's citizenship (Shaw and Charsley, 2006), my research shows how citizenship can also be co-opted into existing patriarchal frameworks to reinforce control. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the gendered workings of transnational nature of forced marriage.

In the context of forced marriage where lack of choice in marital decision-making already becomes prominent in women's lives, global political economy can be defined as a 'big picture' element where the British passport or citizenship is seen or sold as an 'allure' and a highly desirable criteria in the marriage market with the potential to lead to perceived life progression due to settlement in a developed country. Due to the transnational nature of these marriages, there is a macro-level element of control creating opportunities for perpetrators (from both the UK *and* outside) who use the immigrations and visa framework to legitimise forced marriages and make women stay in them. Depending on the variation in the direction of large sums of money being exchanged between the women and husbands' families, i.e., dowry or bride price (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Rastogi and Therly, 2006; Anitha et al., 2018), there are considerable financial advantages involved in the context of transnational forced marriages where women's British citizenship facilitate the economic or socio-political gains for families involved. Evidently, this is done in the backdrop of asymmetries between "'bride-givers' and bride-takers', a global hierarchy of nations, gendered citizenship, gendered economic opportunities" (Anitha et al., 2018: 70), the carefully constructed image of 'the good

daughter', and women's gendered socialisation into the family narrative, which encompass the global political economy of such marriages.

British citizenship is actively incentivised via forced marriages to enable the continuance of family ties abroad, or to secure the most financial gains through the discriminatory practice of dowry or bride price – in return for a wife with British passport. All victim-survivors in this research had a British passport. It was found that when dowry was involved (i.e., where the woman's family expends considerable sums of money to the husband and/or his family), victim-survivors still had to pay for the marriage sponsorship of their spouses. Similarly, when the husband's family had paid money to the woman's family, women were expected to go into formal work to sponsor the visa for her husband to come to the UK. Firstly, this pattern demonstrates that the financial gain was to be made by either the woman's family or the husband's family once the husband's British citizenship was secured or steps were taken to secure it. Secondly, victim-survivors were simply expected to go along with the strategy, an experience which they often related to as 'being part of a deal' brokered by families with the larger intention of settlement in the UK. Gendered, economical and transnational structural inequalities continue to overlap and exist in women's 'during' stage, often making their experience akin to "disposable women" – a term coined in the context of transnational abandonment of brides from India who had an arranged marriage with British-born South Asian men (Wright, 2006; Anitha et al., 2017). A unique finding of this research is that women were still treated as disposable in their forced marriages, even when they were the ones holding the British citizenship. Recalling a time when her brother-in-law (who was also settled into the UK via the family migration system through marriage) complained about Sharmin's 'Westernised' behaviour to her father, Sharmin reflects on how she "was just a transaction" due to the features of the gendered, economic and global structural inequalities discussed above:

> I was just a transaction. I wasn't his sister-in-law, I wasn't a human being. I was just his brother's passport to bring his brother to this country. I did disclose that my dad is a violent man. I disclosed to the brother-in-law that it's a forced marriage, I didn't really want to get married, I don't even love your brother, but I'll do what I got to do. I told him all of this. But he wanted to take it all back to my father. So even my brother-in-law knew something isn't right, however, marriage has happened, transaction has been made, dowry was paid…you crack on with it. Again, when we're talking about Asian weddings, we're talking about lots of transactions that have happened that we don't even know about. It's not like a 1000-pound

wedding, we're talking about a lot of money, a lot of land, it's two family's transaction. So, the amount of pressure for the marriage to work is a lot. (Sharmin)

Sharmin identifies herself as a disposable commodity because her British passport enabled her father to attain money and land, constructing her as a subordinate citizen who can be abused, and exploited by multiple people, with impunity. Concurrently, her citizenship allowed her husband to secure valid entry into the UK. Her marriage was a transaction via her positioning as a commodity— land and money in return for her first husband's better life in the UK. This transaction is symbolically carried out against women's bodies, without their say in it or knowledge of it. In the main, it grants total access, of any nature (in terms of migration, money and marriage), to husbands and their families. When victim-survivors who experience the transactional and transnational nature of forced marriage engage in behaviours considered to be shameful and dishonourable, it is seen as the husbands not getting 'their fair share of the deal'. For Sharmin, the pressure to not only be a certain way in the marriage (i.e. not be Westernised), but also to stay in the marriage was considerable because she was expected to keep her father's end of the deal, at the cost of her physical and emotional well-being– denoting the hidden costs of the global political economy of forced marriage. It is also noteworthy that because she was only 17 years old at the time of her first forced marriage, there were sexual costs associated with this transaction.

Financial pay-offs other people get access to and enjoy (husband, husband's family, parents) by capitalising on women's British passports constitute an overlap between the transnational and transactional nature of forced marriage. Between the overlapping processes of migration and marriage, men are more attuned to prioritising the process and benefits of migration, whilst women are sensitised to prioritise the social, economic and gendered norms of marriage — warranting a reinvigorated focus on women's position within "gendered socio-cultural milieus and economic norms, and sources of global power imbalances" (Anitha et al., 2018: 67). A mismatch becomes apparent between individual preconditioning to the process, with men capitalising on the consequent vulnerabilities of women as a result of this mismatch. Parents, working through the global political economy of forced marriages, sign their daughters up for more than just the promise of bringing husbands from overseas into the UK. Links with control can be charted in Sharmin's accounts of feeling like a 'transaction' because it evidences parents' ownership of their daughters to do with what they want and to make a profit and/or increase their status along the way. Therefore, situations of vulnerability are further reproduced for women within the broader context of the global political economy of forced marriage and control, with women facing multidimensional abuse from their own

parents, husbands and husbands' family. In the context of forced marriage, citizenship was not a source of empowerment for British-born South Asian women but rather a mechanism of intensified control. Victim-survivors' citizenship status was appropriated by both natal and marital kin as a strategic asset in transnational marriage arrangements, reducing them to facilitators of male mobility and reinforcing their subordinate roles. Unlike Qureshi, Charsley and Shaw's (2014) findings, where male vulnerability is occasionally visible and citizenship dynamics are fluid, my data demonstrate the routinised and structural ways in which women's citizenship was commodified—producing layered forms of coercion and reinforcing hierarchies rather than challenging them. Interestingly, there was an instance where the husband and husband's family believed the victim-survivor to hold power in actualising their agenda to settle in the UK, showing that these transactions are fragile and nuanced, and not straightforward:

> All his family, whenever we had any arguments, when I was still in India with him, they would ask him to like apologise to me or they would tell him, 'Don't talk to her otherwise she won't take you to England', you know? I am not stupid, I understand what that means. (Roop)

Roop is aware that her husband views her as a means to move to the UK, and she also notices that her in-laws see her as having the power to secure his entry into the UK. However, the dynamics differ here: her husband does not hold the same power over his parents, who protect Roop from his disrespect, at least until his move to the UK is secured. The global political economy of forced marriage operates in ways where she knows that because her mother forced her into marriage, she was compelled to bring her husband back with her to the UK, because that is what her mother wanted. Therefore, she does not have power in this moment, because it's her mother's power over her in this moment, and husband's power afterwards. Women's vulnerability and unequal status within natal families results in gendered devaluation of women after their husbands start to live with them in the UK. Even though Roop was perceived as essential by the marital kin in facilitating husband's entry to the UK, she concurrently realised that her husband only married her for that.

Five out of six victim-survivors were taken to their family's home countries in the lead-up to their forced marriage. Two of them were kept there against their will for a few months immediately after the forced marriage. This was the time when they first experienced coercive control and domestic abuse by their husbands and husbands' family. It is also noteworthy that Sharmin (aged 17 at the time of her first forced marriage) and Roop fell pregnant immediately after their forced marriage, strongly implicating non-consensual sexual acts within the marriage while abroad. While it is patchy to ascertain whether they were forcibly kept abroad after their forced marriage, literature points to

"forced relocation of women in their home countries until they are able to legally sponsor their husbands" (Hester et al., 2007: 37). Another negative consequence of being kept abroad includes forced pregnancies to bolster and expedite husbands' cases and visa approvals.

Most existing research focuses on the experiences of abused migrant women within the UK (Anitha, 2008; Imkaan, 2017). Anitha, Roy, and Yalamarty (2021) advance our understanding of the persistent patterns of coercive control and domestic abuse by introducing the concept of 'transnational marriage abandonment'. This study on the abandonment of wives across national borders has focused on three main strands: (1) women who migrate to the UK after marriage and then experience abuse, abandonment, or are forced to flee within the UK; (2) women who are deceived into returning to their home countries after being brought to the UK; and (3) women who are left behind in their home countries due to a lack of sponsorship from their British husbands (Anitha, 2016). Despite these insights, there is scope to study the abandonment experienced by British-born South Asian women who, after being forced into marriage, are subjected to isolation, control, and sexual violence while being kept abroad. The difference in this case is that it is the woman's family who abandon her to the marital family. This research finding highlights natal family abandonment after forced marriage, thus situating such experiences within the framework of transnational marriage abandonment. This, when conceptualised alongside the unrelenting nature of coercive control, further explains the narrowing of agentic capacity of women during their forced marriage. As seen earlier, women often had little control over their own money as their husbands sent that money to their own families in their home countries. This research elevates a nuanced understanding of forced marriages with a cross-border element, by situating the transnational experiences of these women within the broader framework of global political economy of control, migration and marriages. By highlighting women's unique encounters with intersectional dimensions of the control at micro and macro levels, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in forced marriages and the transnational dynamics of control— all of which work together to keep women within forced marriages.

This section examined how women's passports are exploited to create new and ongoing contexts of violence and abuse in unfamiliar global environments, thus visibilising the transnational dynamics of control, facilitated by the global political economy of forced marriages. It highlights how these women are often abandoned by their parents, leaving them at the mercy of their husbands, who treat them as part of a transactional deal, adding to the discourse of disposable women. In this research, women were seen as assets, but without agency. Despite being undermined for their skin colour, weight, or

'attractiveness,' they still held value—only in terms of what their families could gain from them. While previous scholarship has noted how women's British citizenship can sometimes destabilise gendered hierarchies in transnational marriages, this research shows how, in the context of forced marriage, that same citizenship is weaponised to deepen women's vulnerability and reinforce control by both natal and marital kin. Therefore, this finding provides a nuanced insight into how women's citizenship was commodified underpinned by factors of global power asymmetries accompanying the processes of marriage and migration. These multiple and multidimensional power asymmetries persisted well into the course of the forced marriage creating economic benefits for some, but exacerbated experiences of abuse for victim-survivors.

## Summary

This chapter reinforces that the control experienced by victim-survivors of forced marriage has a lifelong nature to it, markedly setting them apart from how intimate partner violence is typically understood (Stark, 2007). The nature of control is categorically multidirectional as women experience a combination of control and pressures across space and time from both their parents and family members as well as their husband and his family members, and the wider community. This 'during' stage reveals parents' attitudes in relation to their daughters' physical and emotional well-being when they actually start living in the forced marriage. This feeds into the development of a 'web of control' where the women's husbands, parents and wider community members create a multiplicative environment for inducing further control into women's lives, making them 'live with' the forced marriage and ceasing all avenues for them to leave.

This chapter delineates the specific and intersecting mechanisms through which women's parents (natal kin), husbands and their families (marital kin), and the broader community exercise control to sustain a forced marriage. It demonstrates that the specificity of South Asian women's experiences of forced marriages implicates multiple perpetrators; multiple relationships within complex power structures shaped by 'honour', shame, and the processes of marriage and migration. Women's 'during' stage comprises of multidirectional and overlapping control. This control can manifest as parents pressuring daughters to conform to their marital household's ways, punishing them for 'dishonorable' actions, or normalising gendered subjugation and sexual access within the marriage. This challenges the notion of a protective 'safety net' being provided by marrying according to parents' choices and

highlighting how the lack of parental support uniquely impacts women's experiences. During forced marriages, women endure a 'web of control,' where parental actions reinforce the control exerted by their husbands and marital families.

Developing on this, this chapter outlines the strategies and behaviours of control enacted by women's husbands during forced marriages. It illustrates how Stark's model of coercive control can encompass the intricate power dynamics inherent in South Asian women's experiences of forced marriage. By demonstrating the ongoing, overlapping and lifelong nature of this control, this chapter makes the case for examining South Asian women's experiences of living in a forced marriage – highlighting the seemingly distinct but overlapping nature of control by different sets of perpetrators. The strategies of control by husband included isolation, leveraging women's historical legacy of control, financial exploitation, sexual violence and reproductive control, harm to children, faith-based control and publicly perpetuating their version of themselves as 'nice' and 'loving' husbands to undermine victim-survivors' sense of agency.

While this chapter establishes how coercion and control endure during the forced marriage, less is known about how these dynamics affect children as they grow up—particularly through their interactions with peer groups and community perceptions. Although victim-survivors did not report direct bullying of their children, they did express concerns about social stigma and exclusion, particularly in relation to their status as single mothers or 'failed' wives (see 6.2.3). This raises important questions about the reproduction of patriarchal norms across generations. One possibility is that some peer group interactions reflect and reinforce dominant narratives about 'good' and 'bad' mothers, thus extending the disciplinary reach of community control. Alternatively, children's peer groups may become spaces of subtle resistance, offering moments of solidarity or divergence from prevailing cultural expectations. These dynamics, while beyond the scope of this study, warrant future research to better understand how the ideological aftershocks of forced marriage reverberate through the next generation—shaping children's social positioning, sense of self and capacity to challenge inherited norms. These peer interactions may also serve to expand or entrench the overarching web of control that operate across familial and community levels—affecting not only women but their children as they navigate systems of 'honour', stigma, and social acceptance.

This chapter also explored the role of the wider community in perpetuating forced marriages by dismissing women's accounts, blaming them for considering leaving, and sometimes exacerbating their control within the marriage, consequently and tangibly contributing to women's sense of obligation to remain in forced marriages. Forced marriages are used as a means to encourage British

citizenship acquisition, either to maintain family connections abroad or to obtain financial advantages, often through the discriminatory customs of dowry, in exchange for a wife possessing British citizenship. Finally, this chapter foregrounds the global political economy to contextualise the macro source of women's British citizenship being leveraged, and the ongoing vulnerabilities this created for women during their marriage. The importance of this chapter lies in conceptualising these findings as overlapping and ongoing experiences in women's 'during' stage, with multiple perpetrators involved at multiple times, exacerbating the abuse they faced, and consequently, making them stay in the forced marriage for longer.

# Chapter 6: Planning to Leave and Finally Leaving the Forced Marriage

## Introduction

The preceding chapter explored how victim-survivors were forced to endure and remain in forced marriages through a complex 'web of control' involving their families, husbands and in-laws, the wider community, and global power asymmetries linked to women's British citizenship. This chapter shifts focus to the events leading up to victim-survivors' decisions to leave their forced marriages, emphasising that exiting these marriages is a complex process that can span weeks, months, or even years.

The first section examines how victim-survivors navigated the decision-making and preparation process for leaving, which involved balancing personal safety, well-being, and autonomy against family norms, the stigma of divorce, potential community ostracism, and severed ties with their natal families. This period is marked by shame, pressure to conform to family narratives, fear of disownment, and a realisation of the lack of support from their families. This chapter also situates victim-survivors' agency in the context of their decision-making process around leaving the forced marriage, in departing from patriarchal, gendered and societal expectations around marriage and the continuity of marriage (Rathor, 2011)

## 6.1 Planning to Leave

### 6.1.1 Considerations about Natal Family

This research found that all victim-survivors underwent a transition period before reaching their 'after' stage. This transitional phase is crucial in the process-based understanding of forced marriage and resonates with Humphreys and Thiara's (2003: 198) work regarding the process of leaving intimate partner relationships involving domestic abuse. This research develops this further in the context of forced marriage to foreground that there is not a simple point of exit to pinpoint, and that exiting is a process (Thiara and Gill, 2010; Siddiqui, 2014). As highlighted in Chapter 5, the natal family was the

first point of contact for some of the victim-survivors when violence and abuse occurred in their forced marriages. Soon, they gauged whether their parents were on board with their plans to leave the forced marriage which either solidified their decision to leave or made it more difficult for them to leave. Ghazala did not leave her forced marriage until she got her parents' approval to do so, hence her transition period comprised of securing her parents' 'permission' to leave her husband. There is a glimpse of her socialisation process, as charted in Chapter 4, built around conformity to parental wishes (Mody, 2016) which continued for twenty years after her forced marriage. She uses the word 'permission' to describe her process of leaving the forced marriage, showing a lifelong commitment to her parents' wishes. When she told her father about her plans to leave her husband, her father, battling ill health himself, acknowledged her abuse but asked her to wait till he passed away to divorce the husband:

> He said, "I am too ill to see you like this and I don't know what I can do for you, at this time, but I won't be here for long. So, whatever you want to do, just wait…" Basically, wait until after I have died, that's what he meant, and he said that he? wouldn't be able to cope with it. Basically, he said to me, "I've never liked him from the beginning and he didn't make your life happy. But I'm dying now and I can't see you getting divorced [cries]. So, after I'm gone, you've got my permission to leave him". (Ghazala)

Considering she was socialised into respecting her parents' wishes, she felt okay respecting her father's dying wish. There is sense of relief rather than resentment for making her wait because she was happy to have received 'permission' from her father to leave her husband. There is a strong emotional element present in Ghazala's plans to leave which she does not necessarily categorise as 'pressure to stay' but as conditional 'permission' to leave. The stigma of divorce, something which will be explored in detail in Chapter 6.2, can be seen at play when her father says that he 'cannot see her getting divorced'. It can be argued that Ghazala's father thought that whatever happened after his death will not have an impact for him, so he was okay with his daughter living with abuse while he was still alive. Perceived community perceptions around divorce might also be a factor in his thinking (Guru, 2009).

On the other hand, Ghazala's mother disapproved of her decision to leave the marriage and dismissed her daughter's abuse owing to the "nice husband" image portrayed by her husband, as discussed in Chapter 5. Her mother had prevented her from leaving, often claiming that her divorce would exacerbate her father's ill health, leading to a longer time spent in the forced marriage as she waited

for her parents' permission regarding her decision to leave. This meant that when her father died, Ghazala still remained in the abusive forced marriage. After dismissing Ghazala's abuse for almost two decades and after Ghazala's father passed away, her mother finally started living with Ghazala and her husband and saw firsthand the coercive dynamics in their household and 'allowed' Ghazala to leave:

> I feel like she [the mother] thought that maybe she needed to see for herself what was really going on or that her presence might help. So, she came and stayed with us for a bit, and that's when she realised. Because there were little things like when he came home and we saw his car coming, we'd turn the TV off and the kids knew. They'd clean everything up because he shouted at them. He threw things, broke things, and [she] saw that they were scared of him. She saw a few things over the months that she stayed. Twenty years and three months when I left him, in the end and that was with her permission, so she gave me the permission to leave. (Ghazala)

In the above quotations too, Ghazala uses the word 'permission' when referring to her mother's eventual acceptance of her decision to leave her husband.  It reveals the deep-rooted influence of socialisation processes, particularly in South Asian cultures, where women are often conditioned to seek permission or convince parents of their individual decisions (Sanghera, 2009; Gill and Harvey, 2016), even those as significant as leaving a marriage. Conformity was a lifelong factor for Ghazala, seeping into her decisions about leaving the forced marriage.

Another way in which natal family considerations manifested was in the form of fear of disownment when women contemplated leaving a forced marriage. This fear is evident in Aliyah's account below where concerns about bringing shame to her natal family, community reactions to her marital breakdown and potential impact on the son underscore the interplay between cultural expectations, individual autonomy and social pressures that influenced her decision to leave the marriage (Anitha, 2023):

> So when I was planning I was worried that when I go back I know my dad will disown me because I am bringing shame to the family by going back. You know, a married girl, daughter, going back with the boy, my little son, it is going to bring shame to the family. That is the, that is the way I have been brought up that it is going to bring shame to the community and people are going to hate me and nobody is going to talk to me and people are going to think my son is, you know, people will pick on my son as he grows up, you know? What I had to do, by then I made a decision that okay, maybe they will disown me but maybe actually I can live my life

for once because actually I was controlled by my dad and my mum and then I was controlled by my husband. So, really, if they disown me, I will have a life of my own with my son. (Aliyah)

A substantial barrier for women contemplating leaving their forced marriages relates to the pressure to maintain continuity of marriage (Rathor, 2011). Aliyah reflects on how she would be blamed for bringing shame to her family for leaving her husband, and returning to her parents, denoting the failure of her marriage. From her account, it is also evident that the fear of being socially ostracised was part of her decision-making. Therefore, her plans about leaving comprised of feelings of "bringing shame to her family", and "people are going to hate me, and no one is going to talk to me", highlighting how forces of shame and potential alienation by community operate as she plans to leave the marriage. Family, community and social networks significantly impact women's feelings of belonging and membership in these groups, highlighting how intersecting social power structures influence their decisions to leave (Anitha, 2023).

Aliyah's considerations further extended to the impact on her son, as she worried about him being picked on as he grew up, indicating that the stigma of being a single mother can have intergenerational consequences. Her account reveals the constant need to align her actions with the family narrative and community expectations, at the cost of her personal autonomy. Interestingly, her plans around leaving also point to individual autonomy and breakthrough, moving from a place of fear to self-determination. Her decision to prioritise her and her son's well-being, even at the risk of being disowned by her family or socially isolated by the wider community, highlights her ability to negotiate with family and community considerations on her own terms. In doing so, she is also thinking about being able to negotiate with the stigmatised identity of being a divorcee (Anitha, 2023). She sees the process as agentic as she realises that being disowned will give her physical distance from the people who have controlled her in the past, and she will actually be able to live a life with her son. In many ways, examining women's plans around leaving foregrounds how women had little choice in choosing their partners, eventually leading to little choice in leaving those partners even when they had mentally prepared themselves to do so, impacting their participation and belonging in relation to family and community relationships.

Sometimes, a swift plan to leave forced marriage was made because of a lack of 'safety net' by women's parents. Chapter 5 problematised the so-called safety net to show how women's parents consistently normalised, downplayed, minimised or justified the abuse women experienced from their

husbands or his family. When Harnoor's father did not stand up for her, and instead supported and justified her husband after an act of sexual assault by the husband (see 5.1.2), she immediately materialised her urge to leave the marriage. The lack of safety and support she felt from her own father propelled her to leave immediately. She recounts:

> When my dad said that to me, I was horrified. I just knew instantly that I had to get away from both of them? I just knew it. So I asked both of them if they wanted tea, they said yes, and I started planning. I don't know how I got this planning ahead but I just planned what I was going to do, it just came to me quite quickly. So I knew I would go into the kitchen, which was across the hall. I put a pan on the stove, made some generic utensil noises, pretending to make tea. I also had to grab my bag which was in the same room as them. I managed to get it without them really knowing, and the next thing was that I quickly went down the hallway. Very quietly I opened the main door, closed it behind me, and just went down 100 stairs scared that they must have figured out that I was gone. Or that they might be following me. (Harnoor)

Harnoor's experience showcases a critical dimension in the decision-making process of women thinking about leaving a forced marriage— the role of natal family support. The lack of support from her own father, who sided with her husband despite the act of sexual violence, was a key trigger for Harnoor to leave the marriage. This account demonstrates the profound impact natal family's stance can have on a woman's decision to stay in or exit from the forced marriage. Men's peer support of each other becomes an important aspect of the response Harnoor received from her father, showing how natal family responses to violence can be both a barrier in leaving, and also indicator that leaving is crucial because of the lack of protection and/or intervention in sexual violence (Latta and Goodman, 2011; Sandberg, 2016). Her father's refusal to stand up for Harnoor and his explicit support of her husband's abusive behaviour (see related quote in 5.1.2) left Harnoor isolated, unsafe and invalidated. It also sent an unambiguous message to her that she could not rely on her natal family for protection, compounding her sense of vulnerability. In this situation where her feelings of abandonment and betrayal were amplified due to lack of support from her father, she saw leaving then and there as the only viable option to be safe and reclaim a sense of agency and self. A lack of positive and forthcoming support from natal family signaled a lack of belonging, safety and protection to women.

## 6.1.2 Considerations about Self

Apart from considerations about family, planning to leave also constitutes thinking about the self when contemplating the decision to leave or escape the forced marriage. For instance, Mehreen was deceived into traveling to her country of origin under the promise that she could marry the boy she loved. However, upon arrival, she was prevented from doing so, and her uncle fixed her marriage to a cousin without her consent.  Mehreen saw this as not only a marriage without her consent, but also a marriage where rape and other forms of abuse would be a regular occurrence:

> It got to me that this man, who was more like a dad to me, he can go out and just, despite knowing where my heart is, you're being so cruel to me. It's like arranging a rape for me isn't it, like he's doing that for me". I got really panicked when my aunt said that I am getting married. I just thought to myself that either I am going to die, or I am going to get married, one of these things is going to happen to me. Then in the village, my mum had her phone, and I took her phone, and I called the [British] embassy. (Mehreen)

The cruelty of the uncle's act, despite knowing her wishes, was seen by Mehreen as tantamount to arranging her rape, amplifying her sense of urgency and the need to take immediate action to protect herself.  Considerations about self can be noted here as Mehreen's perception of the forced marriage was accompanied with anticipated ongoing abuse (Gangoli et al., 2011). This foresight triggered her decision to escape as she was not just avoiding an unwanted and forced marriage with accompanying sexual violence, but also actively fleeing from a life of continuous thwarting of her personal autonomy. By contacting the embassy, Mehreen leveraged external support for herself to escape a situation where she found no support from her own family.

The self was also involved when victim-survivors had made the mental decision to leave the forced marriage and started to work on themselves to materialise their plans to leave. For Sharmin, her second forced marriage eroded her sense of self with her perpetrator controlling her appearance by compelling her to gain weight and subsequently enforcing conservative ways of dressing.

> I slowly started being myself again after I had had enough with that marriage. I started losing weight because the man made me put lots of weight so I could cover up. (Sharmin)

This manipulation not only physically changed her, but also suppressed her individuality and autonomy. Her efforts to lose weight go beyond a physical transformation; it is a step towards reclaiming her agency (Williamson, 2010; Mirza, 2017). By actively reversing the changes imposed on her, she began to reassert her sense of self. This process of self-recovery represents how regaining control over their bodies and lives while planning to leave (Stark and Hester, 2019) becomes a critical

step towards leaving the marriage. The decision to leave a forced marriage is not merely a physical act but involves considerable mental and emotional readiness. For Sharmin, the process of losing weight was linked to her mental decision to leave, serving as a symbolic step towards the reassertion of her agency in relation to leaving the marriage (Anderson, 2009). This research highlights that victim-survivors, despite fearing negative responses from their natal families and societal stigma around divorce, exhibited agency. They contemplated and often acted to leave forced marriages, with or without family support. Therefore, the consideration of the self when planning to leave is important to highlight as victim-survivors like Sharmin mentally and physically prepared to leave forced marriages.

Sometimes, the attitude of natal family condoning and justifying husbands' abuse within the forced marriage triggered women to look out for themselves, on their own. This was a time when they stopped explicitly voicing their desire to leave, perhaps owing to the anticipated responses by natal family to stay in the marriage at all costs but made tangible plans to leave in silence. Roop's account below illustrates her strategic decision-making to secure enough independence before finally leaving her marriage, even without the support from her natal family:

> After the stillbirth, I couldn't work at that time, I just thought, you know what, I am going to start studying now but I kept it very quiet from him and my family. When he asked, I just used to say, "oh I am just doing two hours here and there while the kids are at the nursery". When he eventually found out, he obviously asked me to quit. But I just kept carrying on because I knew I wanted to get out of this marriage and I couldn't tell anyone. So I started to study, found a really nice job, and then he and my mom both started asking me to leave that too. But deep down, only I knew why I was working, why I was studying- because I wanted to leave him. Without a job, there was no way I was going to be able to leave. (Roop)

Roop's decision to leave saw her secretly pursue education as a gateway to eventual freedom and security to leave her husband and practically support herself and her kids when she was not supported by anyone. Her account reflects the intricate planning women do when preparing to leave a forced marriage, underscored by the importance of financial independence as a form of empowerment (Sharp-Jeffs, 2017), with opposition from natal family and husband. Despite opposition against education and work from both the husband and her mother, she continued, driven by the understanding that economic stability, security and self-sufficiency were crucial for leaving the marriage. Roop understood that her mother could not see beyond the "nice husband" image and insisted Roop change her decision to leave on previous occasions, yet this did not undermine Roop's

resolve to go through the planning process on her own, in silence. Her calculated effort at planning her exit shows her foresight but also underscores the isolated nature of planning the exit due to lack of natal family support. She recounts:

> I feel like with the whole situation, it's not like I wasn't strong from day one, I wanted to do things my own way but I never got the support from anyone in what I wanted to do for myself. That remains heartbreaking for me. (Roop)

Roop identifies herself as inherently strong, yet her resilience is overshadowed by the dismay at not receiving support, encouragement or assistance from her natal family. This denotes a form of dissonance between her internal strength and external support and validation she craved but never received. Planning to leave the forced marriage was a complex process since it became an even more daunting task for her as she felt very alone in her marriage. Her account highlights her awareness of her own strength, seeking autonomy despite all odds, but also the severe impact of lack of natal family support on her seeking to reassert her autonomy and re-build her life. The planning and decision-making processes of victim-survivors regarding their exit from the forced marriage are not linear, uniform or homogenous.

## 6.1.3 Agency

In understanding the process-based nature of forced marriage, an examination of planning around leaving not only outlines the decision-making process and negotiations involved in exiting the forced marriage, but also the complexities of women's agency within the lifelong contexts of having lack of choice and support, and coercion. Anitha and Gill (2009) call for a "new discourse of personal freedom" which considers South Asian women's agency in the context of choice and coercion they are exposed to. This can further extend to South Asian women's agency in the context of their life before, during and after forced marriage, and beyond just resistance or subordination (Mahmood, 2005:15). This research illustrates women's agency while experiencing the 'web of control' enabled by natal family, husband, husbands' family, wider community and the global asymmetries of power. The nature of agency highlighted in this chapter is not situated within essentialist views of South Asian women as passive victims lacking agency, but instead reflects their lived realities and adds to feminist knowledge about agency from racially minoritised cultures (Pande, 2014). This research explored South Asian

women's agency in navigating and negotiating spaces where they did not receive support from natal families, husband, community and social networks. Victim-survivors were also aware of intended outcomes such as severed ties with natal family or disownment or continued dismissal from natal family yet chose to act on their plans to exit regardless. This highlights the complex interplay between agency and considerations about family, family ties, and sense of self, an important factor in women's decision to leave. The agency of South Asian women, as demonstrated in this research, involves strategically testing the waters and gauging potential support. They assess their own risks to determine whether a long-term strategy is feasible or if immediate action is necessary.

This research examines victim-survivors' narratives on agency and choice at a time when they had been consistently denied choice, respect and individual autonomy (Thiara and Gill, 2010). Women's agency while contemplating leaving also brought to the surface their initial lack of choice in being in that marriage in the first place. The planning around leaving outlined in this process-based understanding of forced marriage is important when conceptualising how victim-survivors leave. It challenges the stereotype of 'oppressed third world women' by showing how South Asian women navigate their way around strict cultural, family and community expectations on their own terms (Pande, 2014). This is done in the form of looking out for themselves due to anticipated rape within the impending forced marriage (*Mehreen*) or father's condonement of sexual violence committed by husband (*Harnoor*), or prioritising their and their children's well-being even at the risk of being disowned or socially ostracised (*Aliyah*), or becoming their preferred versions of themselves to re-assert their sense of self (*Sharmin*), or becoming financially independent and secure enough to be able to finally leave the husband (*Roop*). It is also important to reconsider viewing agency as challenging, subverting or resisting social and family norms. For example, Ghazala's case involved her parents getting on board with her decision to leave and the conditional permission granted by her father. What may appear as passivity is actually a form of agency which is better understood within the context of subordination and conformity to family narrative, highlighting the complexity of autonomy (Mahmood, 2005) and how agency is sometimes embedded within the ongoing and co-occurring experiences of abuse for South Asian women.

## 6.2 After leaving the forced marriage

### 6.2.1 Role of Natal Family

Following their exit from the forced marriage, victim-survivors face a lack of support from their natal families, in fact they can experience further control exerted by their parents and natal family as a form of punishment for leaving. This research finds that escaping a forced marriage did not necessarily result in freedom from the coercive and controlling strategies that initially led to the forced marriage. The post-forced marriage stage for victim-survivors in this research is characterised by punishment from their natal families for their non-conformity to and disruption of the family narrative, as well as by the continued invalidation by their natal families regarding the abuse they endured within the marriage and their decision to leave it.

### 6.2.1.1 Threats

Mehreen's forced marriage case, which was brought before the Crown Prosecution Service after she was brought back to the UK, illustrates the complexities and ongoing challenges faced by victim-survivors post marriage (Gill and Gould, 2019). Although threats from her family in Pakistan did not directly target her, they significantly pressured her to withdraw the court case as she was perceived to be dishonouring her family by prosecuting her uncle:

> I had to kind of juggle everything and then back home, of course, we've got my family, screaming down the phone "Don't do anything, don't do a case, don't do that". They were like 'you are taking our *izzat* to court and it won't look good if he [the uncle] goes to jail'. And I just got to this point where it was all just like 'I need to let it all out. I've had it in me for so many years. I've been abused from the day I remember. And this abuse has gone from 1 to 100 and its never ever stopped and it's just going and going and going. And I'm always going to be controlled this way'. I really wanted to get away from these people, so I'm just like "No". In retaliation, these people burnt the house down in Pakistan. Multiple people were phoning me, swearing, asking me to take the case back. Bashed my maternal granddad's window- things like that. (Mehreen)

For Mehreen, escaping the forced marriage and subsequently seeking justice is fraught with interrelated forms of punishment (Idriss, 2015). Here, the punitive responses by her uncle's side of family included the arson of her mother's family's house in Pakistan and the destruction of property there, which underscored the punishment and severe repercussions of both her escape and her pursuit of legal remedies. Different people in the natal family had varied negative responses to Mehreen's act

of escaping her forced marriage and then pursuing a criminal case against the uncle. These acts of violence and intimidation serve to reinforce the control mechanisms initially used to enforce the forced marriage, highlighting the lifelong nature of control before and after escaping the forced marriage. It is important to note that kinship relationships, both locally and globally, along with the power imbalances within them (Mirza, 2015), are being used to pressure and threaten Mehreen into withdrawing her court case. This situation highlights the multi-directional and multifaceted nature of the control she experiences during the 'after' stage.

The above quote also highlights that Mehreen's perception of justice relates more to being heard and recognised, aligning with the idea of justice as recognition and voice (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). Critically, Mehreen's engagement with the legal system provided her a semblance of being heard and seen. The court process not only allowed her to narrate her ordeal but also represented a critical step towards breaking free from the cycle of abuse and control, and regaining her individual autonomy previously denied to her.

## 6.2.1.2 Disownment

Victim-survivors in this research were also punished for non-conformity to the family interests regarding marriage as permanent by means of disownment. Culturally, marriages inherently carry finality with them, a sense that 'this is it', straying away from which can besmirch a family's reputation (Gangoli et al., 2023: 10). The 'after' stage for victim-survivors was rife with instances where coercion stopped, and punishment began in more explicit ways. Disownment makes it clear to victim-survivors that their parents or family have been operating with them on a conditional basis: that if after marriage, they break the family narrative or bring shame to the family, they will not be spoken to, and that is their punishment. Even when disownment comes at a conflicting time when many women needed their parents to be on their side, it becomes clear to them that the period of punishment will entail social and cultural isolation (Walker, 2020: 385).

Disownment in the 'after' stage functions similarly to the use of the 'silent treatment' by perpetrators of coercive control in intimate partner relationships (Stark, 2007; Williamson, 2010). Both tactics serve to convey a message of rejection and punishment to the victim-survivor. Harnoor developed an estranged relationship with her mother when her mother got wind of her final decision to divorce. During the marriage, Harnoor was in Denmark while her mother was in the UK and used phone calls to pressure her into staying in the marriage. Ultimately, her mother stopped all contact with Harnoor and disowned her for not going back to her ex-husband:

when it became very clear to her that I wasn't going back to him, she finally got it, she stopped taking my calls and so I was disowned that first time and it was like nearly 2 years before she finally talked to me again and that was when I was in Australia. Once I called like towards the end of years' time in [overseas country] and she told me to come back home and that she would forgive me for everything I had done. (Harnoor)

The act of disownment by the mother is intended to isolate and punish Harnoor for her non-compliance, reinforcing the family's control and interests over her decisions. The mother's eventual willingness to speak to her, conditional upon Harnoor's perceived remorse and readiness to return home, is also an example of strategies used to exert control. The offer of forgiveness is framed as a reward for compliance.

The 'after' stage is characterised by rejecting family control (contrary to women's socialisation as charted in Chapter 4), but still experiencing unforeseen and unpredictable albeit pervasive control from family (Idriss, 2017). It is important to contextualise that women exercise agency in a space which actively labels them as sources of shame, continuously negotiating with coercion and control (Williamson, 2010). For Roop, she comprehended her exit from forced marriage as directly bringing shame to her mother but refused to internalise this rationale even when her feelings of sentimentality were invoked by mentioning her father who had passed away:

"She, like I let her down. I have done something which she can't go to community and tell people, she is not proud of me at all. That is shame, for her. What will other people think I have done? First I brought shame when I decided to divorce him. I am single mum, I am bringing shame to my family. I divorced, I divorced my husband, I am bringing shame to my family. My mum said I brought shame to my dad. But I loved my dad to bits, you know? And I said, "No, I didn't. I have done, I think I have made him proud". Deep down I don't feel I brought any shame to any of my family because I have done everything they wanted me to do from day one, even if I was unhappy. And now I am married to my new husband. First thing my mum was saying, 'Oh, what will other people say?' And I said, 'I don't care, mum.' Now if only I had the courage to say the same thing when I was twenty, twenty-two." (Roop)

The fact that years after her divorce, Roop married a white British man, is also shameful for her mother, who disowned her for this. She connects her situation to how having a boyfriend went against her family's expectations. However, she asserts her agency and autonomy in this pivotal moment by stating, "I probably have done what I could have done when I was twenty or twenty-two".

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Acknowledging that she has had little benefit from operating within the family narrative as she did "everything they wanted me to do from day one, even if I was unhappy", she restored agency in her experience by not seeing shame in what her family, and community saw as shameful and reflecting how she was not able to exercise this courage earlier in her life:

> All my life I wanted to do something totally different than my mum wanted me to do, so that was the clash. And she wanted to control me because she probably deep down thought if I got to start doing things my way I would probably end up having boyfriend and bringing shame to family, because that is probably actually what I have done now. (Roop)

> Yes, my mum did not talk to me for six or eight months when I told her about my new husband, especially because he is white British. (Roop)

Exiting a forced marriage does not equate to exit from sources of control, as intersecting forms of oppression—such as threats from the extended family in the home country (Anitha, 2010), foreseeable risks to personal safety faced by victim-survivors as single mothers (Thiara and Gill, 2010), and the conditional 'love' from parents—can obscure victim-survivors' ability to fully see the separation through. During this stage, victim-survivors often set aside their families' perspectives on shame, their own fears of isolation, and community judgments to reevaluate the controlling behaviours they have endured since childhood. This process allows them to redefine their exit (Pitman, 2017), regardless of whether they have parental support. Anitha and Gill (2009) discuss how socio-cultural pressures, feelings of shame, manipulation, threats, and fear of reprisals operate along a continuum of consent and coercion prior to the occurrence of a forced marriage. It is evident that the 'after' stage also involves women recognising, naming, managing, and negotiating these tactics and exercising agency in diverse ways.

### 6.2.1.3 Continued Invalidation by Parents

Natal family's recognition of women's forced marriage and abuse within that marriage was largely missing even after they decided to leave or left those marriages. This research found that lack of acknowledgement by natal family regarding victim-survivors' experience before and during the forced marriage contributed to their feelings of invisibility, neglect, and lack of support, especially in the 'after' stage. Most importantly, all victim-survivors recalled the demeanor of their parents whilst mentioning their ex-husbands and how invalidated that made them feel.

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When Aliyah left her ex-husband and started visiting her parents on weekends, her mother tried to hide the separation and continued to praise her son-in-law publicly. This tangible invisibilisation of her daughter's experience of abuse and separation was an attempt to put rumors about Aliyah's rocky marriage to rest. In the following account, Aliyah feels invalidated not only because of her family's unanimous act of keeping her separation hidden but also because of her mother's keen endorsement of her daughter's abuser:

> And three years on I am in my safe house with my little boy in hiding but my mum till this? date has not told anyone, or doesn't tell people if she can help it, that I am separated. If someone asks her, 'How is your son in law?' She will say, 'My son in law is fine.' Literally like this smile, today if someone asked her. And she knows a lot of things that happened to me in the last three years, even the sexual abuse. 'Oh my son [son-in-law], yes he is fine. Yes he is lovely.' She talks and it kills me inside. Just tell the truth. This, this man that you are smiling and saying is okay, he is like, you know, done so much to my life, he has ruined my life, physically and mentally. (Aliyah)

In this study, three victim-survivors found it particularly frustrating and triggering when their natal families maintained a facade of normalcy or spoke favourably about their sons-in-law, despite the separation or underlying issues. This behaviour is perceived as a denial of the victim-survivors' experiences and struggles which exacerbates their emotional distress. The insistence on presenting a positive image of the sons-in-law by the natal family not only invalidates the victim-survivors' feelings but also perpetuates a harmful narrative that undermines their autonomy and the legitimacy of their experience of abuse. The research finds that maintenance of the husband's 'positive' image, despite the separation and the realities of abuse during the forced marriage, serves to uphold notions about the importance of continuity of marriage, avoidance of shame, and community perceptions (Sanghera, 2009; Anitha, 2010). The insistence on projecting an idealised ongoing marriage, even in the face of separation, highlights the complex interplay between individual subjugation and family 'honour' even after having left the forced marriage.

Families consciously reject treating their daughters empathetically because they do not see them as victims-survivors, they see them as breakers of family code deserving mistreatment and punishment (Dyer, 2015; Bates, 2021), implicating control after a forced marriage. Similarly, they do not see themselves as culpable as the 'first perpetrators' before their daughters' experience of abuse within their marriages. However, their perpetration continues in both overt and subliminal ways which includes: not acknowledging the abuse endured by their daughters and their own specific role in

putting their daughters in this position in the first place; by making excuses for the ex-husbands, attributing their rationales behind abuse to alcoholism, for example, or blaming their daughters for not being 'good' wives. The following excerpt from Roop's interview puts into perspective how parents' complicity contributes to victim-survivors feeling that their narratives are not theirs, but their parents' to alter, across time and space, without actually acknowledging their own, parental, role before, during and after the forced marriage:

> You know, like, my mom, my mom still today if you ask her, she will say he wasn't a bad person. His habits were bad. He was only beating me because he was drinking. He was only beating me because he was...you know, he had an anger issue. So, that's okay for him to beat me because he had an alcohol problem, and he has anger problem. (Roop)

> I don't think they want to understand. You know, when someone makes a mistake it takes the guts, how many times our elders have said to us they have made mistake? Our parents will never ever say to us they made a mistake. But I, I know that she made a mistake by rushing for things and if, you know, if her daughter wanted to do she had another dreams she should have, but then I can't, I can't talk about that with her. But then I think things were not dealt [with] properly that time. I think she wanted to show whole society how, how, how her kids are so under her control. If she clicks her fingers the kids will do anything for her. That is control for her. (Roop)

The 'after' stage poignantly captures women's understanding of the longevity of the control (Idriss, 2017) they faced from their parents, with the latter never fully seeing or admitting their wrongs along the way, perpetuating a culture of unaccountability, entitlement and this being the natural way of family life (Gangoli et al., 2023). Such a culture reinforces a hierarchical family structure grounded in intergenerational abuse and lack of choice and agency which persists even after women have left the forced marriage (Reddy, 2014). Roop's statement that parents "will never ever say to us they made a mistake" underscores the ingrained belief in parental infallibility and entitlement to exert force to enact their decisions in instilling conformity which further invalidates women's experiences of forced marriage and the abuse experienced within those marriages. In a similar vein, Harnoor was slapped across the face by her mother when a decade after her forced marriage, she tried to make her mother see her role in it:

> After a long time when I have moved away, she came to see me, and she very casually said that I had messed up my own life. And I told her that mom, you should not have married me to him. And she slapped me and said, 'how dare you' (Harnoor)

It is important to understand forced marriage as a process because when we approach the 'after' stage, parents' culpability, which has hitherto been under-explored, or looked at only in the 'before' forced marriage stage, becomes highly visible. At a time when she yearned for family while feeling isolated at a refuge, Sharmin recalls her last conversation ever with her father after he tried to strangulate her for deciding to leave her forced marriage:

> The only one time when I was in a refuge and my daughter was a certain age, and I remember my dad crying on the phone saying, 'where did I go wrong'? So this guy…he is self-blaming himself for everything I have done, but still not realising that 'everything you did father was wrong'. Trying to control, seeing me as a property, like objects. (Sharmin)

Perpetration of abuse continues even after exiting the marriage when victim-survivors' experiences are not acknowledged by their families or are completely altered for the sake of the family narrative (Idriss, 2017; 2018). Victim-survivors in the research did not necessarily expect or demand apologies from their parents. However, their parents' minimisation and dismissal of daughters' experiences of abuse and pursuit of justice exacerbated their psychological distress. This compounded their difficulties in seeking love, assurance, care, and support from their families. Interestingly, it also brought to light an important consideration in the process-based nature of forced marriage: what is the natal family's contribution to the victim-survivors' sense-making of the forced marriage, and the abuse endured within it.

At times, women felt further isolated when they felt like they needed to hide 'real' and practical aspects of their separation process from their parents. For Aliyah, even though she was able to visit her parents on weekends after leaving her husband and leave her son with them while she attended the court proceedings, she did not feel supported by her parents during the court case. Her mother insisted Aliyah to stop going to the courts altogether in the hopes that either the matter would quiet down or that Aliyah would eventually go back to her ex-husband. The isolation was most prevalent when there was no interest from the parents about her progress or well-being during the court case, and she eventually accepted that she will have to go to the courts by herself, prompting a scary feeling throughout this process.

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"So I used to just tell them I was going to court and they never asked anything about it. Sometimes my mum would be like, 'Oh, stop going to the court. My mum saying to me like, 'Why do you need to go to court? Just leave it. If you don't do anything he will leave you alone.' And I just said that 'I need to protect me and my child, I am going to have to go to court. I don't like it. Do you think I do?' And my mum was like, 'Don't go, just leave it. It will go away.' And I think she thought one day I will probably go back to him so... they didn't want to know or deal with the court bit. They just want to know what the result was and I never told them and I just went myself and it was difficult. So it is very scary going into court. The whole experience of it was okay but it would have been good to have support. It gives you that, erm, warmth". (Aliyah)

Aliyah's account exemplifies the challenges faced by victim-survivors pursuing justice especially without support from their families. Aliyah recounts her experience of going to court and how her parents' perceptions did not align with her own. Her mother's dismissive attitude – "Just leave it, it will go away" – shows how she thought that inaction by Aliyah might lead to a resolution, i.e. Aliyah going back to the ex-husband. What's also at play here is the bigger issue of denial and avoidance within the family about the severity of abuse, making the court process a lonely and isolating experience for Aliyah. In essence, the lack of acceptance of women's reality by their families reflects a deeper systemic injustice (Gangoli, Bates and Hester, 2020). By invalidating Aliyah's reality, her mother is perpetuating a form of injustice, suggesting that Aliyah's perceptions, decisions and concerns are less valid. By not engaging with Aliyah's court process, her parents are implicitly condoning her ex-husband's actions and prioritising family harmony or community perceptions over her safety and pursuit of justice.

Women often felt punished by their families for leaving a forced marriage, either through a lack of support during the 'after' stage or by being disowned entirely. For the victim-survivors in this research, isolation, invalidation, and neglect from their natal families had a lasting impact on their healing journey, impacting their ability to rebuild their lives. This stage reveals how negative reactions from natal families to the women's decision to leave exacerbate their sense of entrapment, highlighting the consequences of non-conformity to family expectations and the lack of acknowledgment of their victimisation.

## 6.2.2 Control by ex-husbands

Four out of six victim-survivors discussed the ongoing nature of abuse, especially psychological abuse, from their ex-husbands even after the forced marriage had ended. The coercive control lens is transformative in understanding the controlling behaviours used by ex-husbands (Myhill, 2017: 39). The common experience of the four victim-survivors in this study after the forced marriage related to ex-husbands' concerted campaign of 'discrediting women within her community and her extended family by spreading rumours' (Humphreys and Thiara, 2003: 201). The ex-husbands' efforts to continue his control over the lives of women can be seen in their attempts to control the narrative around their separation, conceal facts about the reality of the abuse perpetrated, and portray women as 'bad' wives (Crossman et al., 2016).

Indeed, the "nice husband" image, as discussed in section 5.2.6, might play a significant role in enabling ex-husbands to continue behaviours that contribute to women's sense of entrapment and isolation. The "nice husband" image allows ex-husbands to garner sympathy and support from the community, simultaneously whilst discrediting the victim-survivors' side of the story. This socially constructed persona of the 'nice husband' often serves as a facade, masking the underlying abusive dynamics within the marriage. Such a persona can be instrumental in manipulating community perceptions, leading to a lack of support for the women's experiences and decisions. The "nice husband" image serves as a powerful tool in the arsenal of coercively controlling behaviour that can be used to manipulate social outcomes for women after the forced marriage. This research found that ex-husbands, and sometimes ex-husbands' family too, alter and de-legitimise women's narratives and lived experiences by setting women up for scrutiny and condemnation for leaving a seemingly good husband. Often, ex-husbands assumed that their actions would eventually reach the victim-survivors and their parents, causing feelings of shame and making them reconcile or conform to the ex-husbands' demands. This is evident in Aliyah's account below:

> And what happened was him and his family were ringing my relatives in the beginning. They weren't ringing my mum and dad, they were ringing my relatives and they were complaining about me saying, 'She is not a good wife, but we will take her back,' so trying to get my relatives to ring my mum and dad to get me to go back. So they thought that if my parents hear that my relatives know then it is embarrassing and I will go back. They thought if she hears that she is going to come back. (Aliyah)

This controlling tactic is underscored by overlapping factors of 'honour', shame, standing in the community and women's perceived conformity into marital norms – all of which usually serve to be motivating factors for compliance and silence from women (Sanghera, 2009; Mirza, 2016). The ex-husband also anticipates that this compounding pressure achieved by altering the narrative around their separation will compel Aliyah to reconcile, thus demonstrating how elements of ex-husband's control played out in her 'after' stage. Transnational shame is also invoked in ex-husbands' strategies where they ensure that not only women's family in the UK, but also wider kin in their home countries know *their* narrative and not the women's (Julios, 2015). For instance, in the case of Roop, the ramifications became evident when the ex-husband's family members began to influence her children negatively against her:

> I always send my boys to see their grandfather, grandmother but they both passed away now. So now we don't…we have no link with anyone now. But until they were alive [sic], my- I always go India and I send boys for like to meet them. And even then, they were telling my boys telling them what I have done wrong. They were telling my boys, your mom left your dad because of, you know, she was probably having another relationship, or she was not listening your dad she was not making your dad happy or whatever. (Roop)

This form of direct manipulation involving children, who might also be victims of domestic abuse themselves, is a common tactic in abusive relationships (Brownridge et al., 2008; Katz, 2015; Crossman et al., 2016; Stark and Hester, 2019). Perpetrators spread disparaging narratives to undermine the victim-survivor's credibility within the family. Contrastingly, in one case, the ex-husband promulgated his narrative of the divorce only to his side of the family, as the woman's family was aware of the abuse within the marriage, and left because of it:

> When he came back from work, and he'd realised I'd gone, he started ringing around his relatives and saying, 'oh, she's left me, she's left me. I don't know where my kids are' and he didn't once ring me. He didn't ring my mum. He didn't ring my brother, to find out where we were but he rang his own side of the relatives, in Pakistan, and his sister and his parents, so 'she's left, she's left' and they made this big thing, 'oh she must have found someone. She's left me for someone'. (Ghazala)

An interesting finding in the 'after' stage is ex-husbands' strategic accusations of extra-marital affairs against victim-survivors as the cause of the marital breakdown, as echoed in Roop's and Ghazala's accounts above. By alleging infidelity, ex-husbands sought to shift blame onto the victim-survivors, garner sympathy from family and community, and thereby divert attention away from their own perpetration of abuse. Women are harshly judged for moral and sexual transgressions (see Phillips, 2003; Patel and Gadit, 2008; Siddiqui, 2005), and instrumentalisation of alleged female adultery can be a potent tool in promoting a narrative implicating women's perceived sexual transgressions. Such perceived transgressions can be closely linked with notions of women bringing dishonour to the family and community, where this dishonour serves as a justification for divorce, along with community members siding with the husband and punishing women by ostracising them or looking down upon them. This demonstrates how even after leaving the forced marriage, women are disproportionately held accountable for upholding family and collective 'honour'. By portraying themselves as the wronged party, the ex-husbands indeed garner sympathy and support from the community, showing the operation of the "nice husband" image. This manipulation tactic enables ex-husbands to reinforce their public image as victims of betrayal rather than perpetrators of abuse.

In cases where some form of contact between the victim-survivors and ex-husband is negotiated, victim-survivors' sense of continuing control is heightened when ex-husbands sought to control the contact:

> But when we went there, he refused to come in the same room as me and he sat in a separate room, and so the kids would go and sit with him for a bit while he was in there. But he refused to come in the same room and face me and talk to me about anything. So, we had to thrash it out like that, with the solicitor going from one room to the other, to back, and I really don't know why he did that. I don't know why he did that. His friends and his family were saying that he was too emotional, but to me it was continuing his control, that he's still in control of the situation, and I don't know whether he was trying to make me out to be the bad guy in front of the kids, or the solicitors or whatever, but he did that… We had about four or five meetings and he always stayed in the other room. He never came in, he never sat directly opposite me to discuss anything (Ghazala)

Ghazala's account provides a vivid illustration of the ways in which control can manifest in the 'after' stage. The ex-husband's refusal to share the same room during meetings, necessitating a shuttle diplomacy approach by the solicitor, can be seen as a continuation of the power dynamics present

during the marriage. By refusing direct communication, the ex-husband not only avoids confronting the issues at hand but also exerts psychological control over the proceedings, making Ghazala feel that "he's still in control of the situation".

Furthermore, the ex-husband's actions might be intended to manipulate the perceptions of the children and the solicitors. By positioning himself as the one who is too 'emotional' to engage directly, he might be attempting to elicit sympathy or paint Ghazala in a negative light. It points to the deliberate strategy to control the environment and the narrative. It places Ghazala in a reactive position, constantly having to navigate the logistical and emotional challenges imposed by this arrangement, simultaneously painting her as the antagonist in front of the children and legal professionals.

Apart from controlling women's narrative about their reasons for leaving even after the forced marriage, another manifestation of ongoing control is through financial exploitation. Despite being divorced for ten years, Roop's husband refuses to remove his name from the joint owned property. By not signing over the house, which was bought solely from Roop's money as her ex-husband never worked (see section 5.2.3), he effectively entraps Roop in a state of financial and legal limbo:

> And now even we are divorced now ten years, the house still on joint name. He's not taking his name out of the property. And that's another control of, you know, now I had filed the application fund in court. And now he's in India for last one year, not signing house on my name. And every time there's something I do, he just run off to his family to India. But I can't run off from anywhere. And I took responsibility of three kids, and I've done it all on my own. And how much that toll took on me. (Roop)

This is a deliberate move by the ex-husband to assert dominance and delay Roop's independency. Furthermore, his avoidance tactic of fleeing to India whenever legal actions are initiated worsens the situation for Roop, making it difficult for her to navigate complex legal challenges and bureaucracies. This ongoing control through property ownership and strategic absences can have significant psychological impacts. It perpetuates a sense of helplessness and frustration, undermining Roop's sense of stability and progress. The toll of managing these continuous disruptions, along with the

responsibilities of raising three children alone, is considerable and reflects the sustained impact of control in the 'after' stage.

Lastly, one victim-survivor also reported that her ex-husband actively sabotaged her new romantic relationship after the forced marriage. Sharmin recounts:

> He threatened to burn the house down, he cut my front CCTV, my back CCTV. I thought wait, what's happening with my CCTV, the internet, the phone lines, but as soon as we saw his face, I told myself I can't lie to myself anymore. And my ex-partner's behaviour was deteriorating, he was following me everywhere. Oh god, it was so so sinister to the point where he has made threats to burn the house down. And then after that night, we saw him on the CCTV just watching the house pacing back and forth, just watching the house for 45 minutes- cutting the CCTV, going around the other side, watching the house for 45 minutes and then again cutting. And me and the kids just had to leave overnight. (Sharmin)

Sharmin's account highlights the persistence of intimidation and control even after she had left the forced marriage. The ex-husband's actions like threatening to burn the house down, pacing back and forth the house and tampering with the CCTV, are strategies to instill fear, disrupting Sharmin's and their children's sense of safety. Indeed, the coercive strategies increased when the ex-husband found out about Sharmin's subsequent relationship, and the need to leave their home overnight reflects the level of threat perceived by the family, indicating Sharmin's shattered sense of safety. Being forced to leave their home and local environments at a moment's notice exacerbates victim-survivors vulnerability (Katz, Nikupeteri and Laitinen, 2020) in the 'after' stage. In contrast to other victim-survivors, Sharmin faced more life-threatening forms of control by her ex-husband demonstrating the ongoing risks and abuse that occur after women leave the forced marriage. There is also a sustained psychological impact of the intimidation and controlling tactics used by ex-husbands which can erode women's sense of moving forward in life and being able to form new relationships with men.

A process-based understanding of forced marriage shows how power and control is continuously framed in relation to the multiple relationships and complicated structures that characterise South Asian women's lives. Women's experiences even after forced marriages are shaped by intersecting and overlapping factors like their geographical location, distance from their kin, support from natal

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family and ongoing experiences of control by the ex-husband. The 'after' stage may exhibit an overlap between how parents are complicit with the ex-husbands' continuing abusive behaviour, as seen in Aliyah's case. The ex-husbands wield their ongoing control after the forced marriage through manipulating community perceptions of the victim-survivors by accusing them of marital infidelity. The 'after' stage for women in this study was rife with ongoing threats and control by the husband, but also negative reactions by natal kin and the wider community. The following section explores how the broader community made women feel excluded and how navigated the stigma of being a divorcee.

### 6.2.3 Community perceptions and stigma around divorce

In South Asian communities, the politics of marriage—encompassing gender, sexuality, religion, kinship, intergenerational dynamics, and culture—extends into the politics of divorce and separation. Limited academic scholarship addresses how women in patrilineal cultures are "uprooted in both marriage and divorce", as they are required to either join or leave the marital home (Amato, 1994, in Guru, 2009). Divorce or separation often leads to the loss of marriage's symbolic and societal value, resulting in women's exclusion from social and community interactions (Sakraida, 2005; Sandfield, 2006; Anitha, 2023). As previously outlined in this thesis, women are socialised to appreciate the central role that marriage plays within social systems, thus considerably affecting their ability to leave forced and abusive marriages. Furthermore, departure from this aspect of gendered socialisation into marriage (as discussed in detail in Chapter 4.2) and the notions of family 'honour', shame, family standing in the community and conformity to family narrative and marital norms, further invites judgement from the wider community. The experience of judgement from the broader community for leaving a marriage is not specific to South Asian women, as documented by Kelly et al. (2014). For the victim-survivors who participated in this research, such attitudes are not peripheral but rather shape the dominant discourse in their 'after' stage, limiting their ability to fully engage in social and community life (Anitha, 2023). This section underscores a delicate time in victim-survivors' 'after' stage where the community they lived in saw divorce negatively, stigmatising both the divorce and the women for being divorced, making victim-survivors feel more isolated, vulnerable and open for scrutiny.

For women like Aliyah, full membership in the community cannot be achieved because she is divorced. This means that every aspect of her behaviour like merely smiling or discipling her child are closely monitored and critically interpreted through a lens of moral and social expectations:

> I am in fear about the fact that when I go into the community, I don't smile because sometimes if you smile, they're like "why's she smiling, she shouldn't be smiling, you know, she's not with her husband anymore" and straightaway, no matter what I say I know that they think it's my fault so I feel like I can't behave in a certain way, like if I've… like if my uncle's come to my dad's house and I know one Saturday [son] was quite tired and he was, you know, he was behaving, misbehaving, so I was telling him, disciplining him and, and straightaway I know if it's someone else there they would've been like "that's why it didn't work out with the husband, that's why, because she's, you know, she's like that with her boy, how was she with her husband, that's why it didn't work out", because, you know, and I think that's what would've happened so I'm very mindful about how I behave when I'm in the community and that influences my interactions with people and things and, yeah, I just keep myself to myself, I don't look up at anyone, I just get up, if I need to go into that community to the shops or anything or take my dad or get my son's haircut, then I don't look around, I try to quickly get in, go down, get my things and come back out again. (Aliyah)

The above account highlights Aliyah's profound sense of fear and self-regulation, even when engaging in banal behaviour like smiling which is driven by her community's stigmatisation of divorced women. The fear of being scrutinised reflects a context where victim-survivors' smallest actions are judged with the community perpetuating a culture of blame and shame. In essence, there are constraints being placed on her stigmatised identity as a divorcee (Anitha, 2023: 15), the outcome of which is a degree of internalisation of social stigma by Aliyah. The constant awareness of how her actions as a divorcee might be perceived by others leads her to alter her behaviour, like avoiding eye contact and limiting her social interactions with people in the community. This is a form of social withdrawal and self-regulation where the fear of judgement from the community leads victim-survivors to limit their own behaviour to avoid negative social and community repercussions. Aliyah is also aware that her actions as a mother will be scrutinised by the community, which influences how she is with her child in public. Her belief that the community is witnessing her disciplining her son might be misconstrued as how she might have treated her husband which, in turn might be the reason for marital breakdown, illustrates how she expects to be blamed for a marriage breaking down. The implied judgement from the

community here relates to how women should not smile in the context of a marital breakdown, for which the community blames them.

For victim-survivors, the 'after' stage constitutes ongoing fear and self-regulation with the need to constantly monitor and change their behaviour in public spaces (Mayeda et al., 2019). This contributes to an exacerbated state of vigilance and anxiety. Community and community perceptions about divorce and divorced women can impede women's ability to attain safe and full membership in social and community lives (Anitha, 2023). After exiting her forced marriage, Aliyah is well-aware of her stigmatised identity and retreats from her social life, avoiding interactions with people, pointing to the isolation experienced by women due to community perceptions.

One of the victim-survivors noted that people from her social and community network behaved differently towards her after her divorce. Ghazala's friends stopped inviting her to events and gatherings, and she became friends with other divorced women. Divorce opened women up for judgements from their community. As Aliyah describes, she felt that even smiling would invite a communal reminder of the loss of marriage that divorce is. More importantly, it was a reminder for her that she could not be visibly happy *and show it* as a divorced woman, thus divorce places restrictions in the way she could enjoy her social life.

Meanwhile Ghazala's experience as a divorced women reflects how people, especially men, approach her differently, implicating her sexuality after divorce, and making her feel like an easy sexual target. She recounts:

> And as soon as people found out you're divorced, I was getting offers. People were saying, you know, 'You wanna come for lunch?' 'You wanna go on a trip somewhere…' You wanna do this? And I thought, you know, this is not what I want. And people that I'd worked with, men, married men, especially, and people did treat you differently. (Ghazala)

Without the protection from unwanted male attention previously granted to her through her marriage, the fact that Ghazala was living alone was seen as an invitation for potential sexual exploitation. Guru (2009: 293) notes how "male control over women's sexuality as a key contributor to women's oppression" continued even after South Asian women got divorced from their abusive husbands. This was also reflected in this research where divorced women living on their own were left vulnerable and sexually targeted by men from their community. For some of these victim-survivors, perhaps it became important to self-police and not attract male attention particularly because their ex-husbands had accused them of extra-marital affairs and positioned them as the 'problem' in the marriage. Thus, they

had to be careful not to give cause to any potential or actual rumors about relationships with men. The 'after' stage for victim-survivors constituted their exposure to risks from male members of the community, sometimes in the form of harassment. This is borne out by Ghazala:

> So, I left. I went to a rented place first for a year, before I got this house, and the, the place I went to wasn't very nice. It wasn't in a very nice area and my car got damaged and my landlord lived four doors down and he would, he saw an Asian woman on her own and tried, he started harassing me after a few months, thinking I might need company, was the way he put it, so I had to get some friends of mine to warn him off. (Ghazala)

Victim-survivors' divorcee status amounts to them being perceived as unprotected and therefore they can become targets for harassment due to their perceived vulnerability. The landlord's inappropriate advances, framed under the guise of offering "company", demonstrate how women's status as a divorcee and living on their own perpetuated further victimisation. Apart from experiencing housing insecurity and ongoing harassment from her landlord, Ghazala's experience is also underscored by racial prejudices (Gupta, 2003). The overlap of race, gender and sexuality here highlights the exacerbated vulnerability experienced by women after they leave the forced marriage and take a step towards re-asserting their independence and autonomy. The fact that the landlord saw Ghazala as an "Asian woman on her own" shows the interplay between gender and race and how he thought of her to be more attuned to harassment. Furthermore, it can be speculated that the racialised dimension of her experience may be driven not just by her status as a "divorced Asian woman living alone" but also by the racial stereotypes that sexualise racially minoritised women (Patel, 2003), making it challenging for Ghazala to rebuild her life outside of gendered control.

What's important in Ghazala's experience is the lingering stigma around divorce and how that implicates women's sexuality, putting the onus on women to protect themselves from sexual exploitation (Guru, 2009) , especially when they might previously have experienced that in their forced marriage. Community perceptions around divorce and divorced women as blameworthy and easy sexual targets was the main way in which victim-survivors in this research experienced control or victimisation in their 'after' stage. As a result, a double-edged sword situation arises where women, such as Ghazala, experience increased vulnerability from their community and local environments without the protective label of marriage, despite having previously endured the controlling aspects of their forced marriage; and they are also blamed for the predatory behaviour of men. Consequently, remarriage may be considered as a means of securing societal and community protection:

> And I never went out looking for a marriage, but with... me and my mum went and we met someone who pursued it, and, and then at that time, I'd only been away from him [ex-husband] eight months, I think, when they first started talking to us. And my mum liked the family, I liked the family, got on with him, and then in the end, I did give in, partly because I felt I was more at risk without that label of marriage. (Ghazala)

What this section highlights is that victim-survivors' status as married individuals garners more community acceptance, even if it is an abusive marriage. Their divorced status renders them as women with no status — detached from natal family, husband and marital family— excluded from the community and society at large, exposing them to risks from others. The community's attitudes towards divorced victim-survivors buttresses parents' fear and shame around their daughters getting divorced and may account for why they continue to pressurise daughters to stay in abusive marriages. However, the impacts of the power and control by ex- husbands and parents overrides the negative weight divorce carries, and victim-survivors leave and negotiate the stigma of divorce by self-regulating their behaviours in public. This research notes that the experiences of victim-survivors with regards to facing scrutiny from the community are all divorce-specific, highlighting the role of stigma around divorce in their 'after' stage.

## Summary

This chapter illustrates that leaving a forced marriage is a complex, prolonged process rather than a single event. Victim-survivors often take incremental steps to prepare and solidify their plans, influenced by family negotiations, fears of disownment, and the stigma of divorce. Lack of support from the natal family, particularly when parents side with the husband, frequently drives victim-survivors to leave, knowing that severing family ties is inevitable. The chapter also highlights the ongoing control and subordination victim-survivors face after leaving the forced marriage, from their natal families, ex-husbands, and the wider community. Natal families exert control by threatening or punishing women for pursuing justice or divorce, leading to exclusion, isolation, and stigma. Many women are disowned by their parents, who invalidate their experiences of abuse and align with ex-husbands, failing to support them during legal proceedings. Ex-husbands maintain control after forced marriage by discrediting victim-survivors' narratives, accusing them of infidelity, and exerting psychological control. They also hinder victim-survivors' independence by refusing to relinquish joint properties or complicating court processes. In extreme cases, ex-husbands may resort to life-

threatening violence forcing women to leave abruptly. The wider community exacerbates victim-survivors' difficulties by stigmatising divorce and scrutinising women's actions, leading women to self-regulate their behavior in public to avoid negative repercussions. The intersection of marital status, gender, race, and sexuality increases their vulnerability, as they are often perceived as sexual targets by male community members. This chapter underscores that the 'after' stage is marked by a persistent lack of support, fear, and control from various sources, making it challenging for women to rebuild their lives. It illustrates how divorce carries a significant stigma, negatively affecting community perceptions of women, their actions and their sexuality. This thesis will now move on to discussing help-seeking responses received by victim-survivors and will then analyse the findings from interviews with practitioners who participated in this research.

# Chapter 7: Formal Help- Seeking and Responses to it

## Introduction

This chapter centres on formal service responses and support for forced marriage victim-survivors at varying points in their help-seeking journey. It gives a detailed account of formal help-seeking routes from victim-survivors' perspectives, and the nature of safeguarding, support and service provision. There have been increased concerns over inadequate initial responses to forced marriage victim-survivors and an overall lack of specialist services for racially minoritised women (Gill and Anitha, 2023). Impediments to good safeguarding practice also include the misidentification of the overlapping levels of risk faced by victim-survivors (Aujla, 2021: 95) at multiple points in their help-seeking journey. Thus, the way forced marriage is understood, defined and recognised substantially shapes the interventions offered, or lack thereof.

The first part of this chapter presents the challenges faced by victim-survivors as they sought help from voluntary and statutory organisations, either when they were making plans to escape /leave the forced marriage, or had left the forced marriage, or both. This section alludes to the un-coordinated nature and insufficient responses provided by schools, refuge services, youth and children's charity workers, and medical health practitioners. It is important to note that some victim-survivors' formal help-seeking accounts relate to events from 10-20 years ago, a time when forced marriage received little policy attention and was not criminalised. The second part draws on semi-structured interviews with members of voluntary and statutory organisations, exploring how they understand and interpret forced marriages, including their knowledge and the distinctions they draw between arranged and forced marriages. It also demonstrates their understanding of increased levels of risk faced by victim-survivors and targeted responses necessary to mitigate those risks. Lastly, to identify facilitators of good practice, this section highlights the nature of multi-agency partnership work between police and third sector organisations. This chapter emphasises the importance of developing a whole-life approach to protecting and supporting victim-survivors.

## 7.1: Seeking and Getting Help

Four out of six victim-survivors interacted with statutory and voluntary staff while attempting to escape forced marriages, seeking formal support for domestic abuse within their marriages, or for the increased violence from natal families after deciding to leave. Victim-survivors' experiences of help-seeking span different timeframes. Previous research on forced marriage highlights a lack of awareness and the need for better service responses (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006; Khanum, 2008; NatCen, 2009). Chantler and Gangoli (2011) note that service failures are strongly linked to cultural discourses around forced marriage, coupled with the fear of being labelled racist (Chantler et al., 2001). The table below contextualises when victim-survivors came in contact with formal sources of help, putting into perspective how responses to the forced marriage victim-survivors were from almost 20 years ago to more recent times.

| | Social Services | Schools | Doctors | Refuge |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sharmin** | 1993 and 1995 | 1993 | | 2002 (first forced marriage); and 2018 (second forced marriage) |
| **Mehreen** | 2008 | 2008 | | |
| **Roop** | | | 2006 | 2007 |
| **Aliyah** | | | 2017 | 2018 |

*Table 4: Timeframe for When Victim-Survivors Sought Formal Help*

## 7.1.1: Childhood experience of coming in contact with social workers: "failed by social services"

There is evidence of varying degrees of initial contact involving social services in some victim-survivors' childhood, similar to some previously studied cases of HBA and forced marriage (Gill, 2014). For Mehreen and Sharmin, physical abuse and neglect at their family home were routine in their pre-teen and early teen years. During this time, they had either tried to run away from home and contacted social services or had social workers doing standard checks. The social work involvement was with the family at the level of one-off interventions predominantly. When victim-survivors were running away and contacting social services, their concerns were generally about abuse at home rather than explicit

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concerns about forced marriage. This period could have been an ideal time for identifying, assessing, and managing potential risks before the forced marriage occurred.

Izzidien (2008: 13) notes that young South Asian girls living with domestic abuse between their parents, and at times as direct victim-survivors of abuse by parents, are more susceptible to capitulating to a forced marriage and potentially entering into a cycle of life-long abuse. For this reason, it is paramount that professionals are attuned to potential warning signs or indicators by listening to the voices of victim-survivors who reach out to them for help, asking the right questions to make an assessment and adhering to the 'one chance rule' (HMICFRS, 2022). The 'One chance rule' cautions practitioners that "they may only get one chance to speak to a potential victim of HBA or forced marriage, and hence only one chance to save a life" (Chantler, Mirza and MacKenzie, 2023). As a child, Sharmin ran away from home on two separate occasions but was sent back home by social services (see Table 4 above). The following account elucidates that public sector professionals lacked general awareness, training and 'professional curiosity' (Munro, 2010: 18; Muirden and Appleton, 2022) in relation to child safeguarding. This particularly overlaps with lack of awareness around forced marriage, HBA and racially minoritsed child victim-survivors of what would now be classed as domestic abuse (see 2.9):

> And I did run away from home twice, once when I was 11 and once when I was 13 and I reached out to social services. They sent me back home. Because my dad was very good at manipulating saying it will be worse for her in social services, you should better just [send her] home. She is lying. Obviously now the social services might have changed but back in the days, my dad was a master manipulator. And he sometimes, during the six-week holiday, he used to beat us up so much that we were all paralysed. And there was no other organisation involved to even notice that there was something wrong. (Sharmin)

Facilitating disclosure and help-seeking is crucial, especially for racially minoritised women who often delay seeking formal support (Gill, 2004; Belur, 2008). Even when they seek help early, their voices can still be overlooked, as seen in Sharmin's case. The above incident reflects a 'protection gap' (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023) in terms of social services not being able to ascertain her motives for leaving home, speaking to the perpetrator who she is trying to get away from, and taking at face value what the perpetrator is saying. While she is aware that her father manipulated social services and downplayed Sharmin's vulnerabilities, she also expresses frustration over inadequate spotting of signs that "something is wrong" and lack of follow-up after she was sent home. Understanding the lifelong, process-based nature of forced marriage is pivotal as it also highlights children's experiences of control

as part-and-parcel (see 4.1) in the 'before' stage. It points to the need to position victim-survivors' childhood experiences of domestic abuse and neglect when thinking about their experience of early forced marriage (Gill and Gould, 2019; Mahil, 2020; Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). Chantler, Mirza and MacKenzie (2023: 843) also note that professionals are showing fresh and nuanced understandings of forced marriage by exploring victim-survivors' childhood and often unearth a legacy of control and coercion before their actual forced marriage— demonstrating a move away from 'event-based' understandings of forced marriage, and towards better professional detection and responses. Exploring the 'before' stage in Sharmin's case would have also revealed her siblings' experiences of domestic abuse at home. It would have also shown that most siblings were forced into marriage by their father, serving as a critical warning sign (Rauf et al., 2013: 139) to potentially save multiple lives.

Mehreen was particularly scathing of social support workers for their lack of understanding of the family dynamics in her daily life with her uncle and aunt. A superficial line of questioning, speaking to children with carers around and not making conscious efforts to understand what day-to-day life is like for the child, as seen in Mehreen's case below, points to poor training of professional agencies (Idriss, 2018):

AD: Right, and we've briefly spoken about the social services here.

Mehreen: Terrible.

AD: Do you have anything more to add to that?

Participant: No, I think that the services are absolutely pathetic, I don't even know why they get paid for it. Honestly, I feel like I have failed them like so many times. it's just disgraceful. I just feel like they don't have the right training, they don't have the right understanding, they come from very privileged backgrounds, and they have little to no understanding of what actual abuse is or what signs to spot like, when I used to get interviewed when I was a child, like when they ask how you are and everything, [name], my aunty used to be really nice to me on those days. She used to coddle me and all sorts, and I used to be like "ohmygod, what's going on", and she used to tell me "[name], don't say anything, don't say anything". And I used to be dying for love, so I used to say exactly what she used to tell me. But she used to be literally…. there used to be a door in between, and she used to be sitting on the other side in the other room, listening to everything while my social worker was asking: "Are you OK [name]; Do you like it here". I'm like 'yeah'. I'm not going to say anything different because I'm in that same environment, I'm in that same situation. You come to meet me once a year and once

again I'm not going to randomly open up to a stranger and be like, "No, I'm not happy". It doesn't work like that. I just feel that the training process or whatever, I think is very wrong. It's like they're not actually saving children, which makes me sad. (Mehreen)

As they have been subjected to ongoing abuse, it can be a confounding experience for children and young people when their perpetrators are suddenly "nice" to them in view of a visit by social workers (Grey and Watts, 2013). The confusion impedes victim-survivor disclosure and help-seeking at a crucial engagement time when social workers could ask deeper questions, build an authentic relationship with the child, and be involved in regular follow-ups (Grey and Watts, 2013; Gill and Gould, 2019). Mehreen reflects on how being in the same physical environment as her perpetrator and knowing that her conversation with the social worker was being monitored made her feel like "she was failed by social services". Her account also demonstrates how the once-a-year nature of social workers' visits was futile in achieving an authentic connection with her to facilitate disclosure (Jobe and Gorin, 2013). This research highlights the ways in which social services let down victim-survivors in their childhood, pointing to the importance of being cognisant of the 'before' stage and the risks victim-survivors might be exposed to before their actual forced marriage.

Furthermore, Mehreen's account also implies that the inability to spot signs of abuse is directly equated with "coming from privileged backgrounds". Intersectionality as a way of understanding oppression and privilege would implicate class (Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1991), but additionally, privilege here is being framed in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding of practitioners to not "presume they know what is happening in the family home" (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024). The lack of sensitivity to nuance in relation to family dynamics, the superficial line to questioning which effectively validates the practitioner's assumptions about the situation by taking at face-value the interaction with Mehreen, highlights how opposing perspectives are not being pursued in Mehreen's case, leading her to term this as a 'privileged' position.

In another instance, Mehreen, who was already in Pakistan and close to her forced marriage, was later joined by her cousin sister from the UK who had directly sought help from social services fearing her own forced marriage once she left the UK. What unfolds is another tactic where Mehreen was made to speak as her cousin to ascertain her cousin's well-being in Pakistan. A sense of 'service betrayal' (Chantler and McCarry, 2020) is apparent due to the inadequate nature of inquiry by social workers which continues the 'protection gap'. It is significantly detrimental even when formal support has been sought at multiple points in victim-survivors' help-seeking journey. In this case, lack of awareness of the situation, family dynamics and the number of people potentially at risk of forced marriage had

profound implications for both Mehreen and her cousin. Had there been regular follow-up and adequate risk assessments in the time they were still in the UK, some of these gaps could have been mitigated, potentially also saving more than one victim-survivor. Social workers in charge of risk assessment or victim contact ought to ask deeper and difficult questions to understand the victim-survivor's situation, whilst being aware that victim-survivors may not have the luxury to be on their own, i.e., away from perpetrators (Kazimirski et al., 2009) — a recurring oversight in Mehreen's case which ultimately eroded her trust in social services:

> […] they said to her [participant's female cousin] "come here for a month's trip". I mean I went for four weeks — ended up staying for a year and a half. But with her, it was like, she was already involved with social workers, because she had already told them that [she] may be forced into marriage so, when the social workers called, [perpetrator] gave the number for [another family member in home country]. They made me be her and speak (emphasis). And the social worker asked me questions like if I was happy. I said yes obviously, I just felt that…a lot of my disappointment actually comes from the services here because they're not really aware of anything. (Mehreen)

## 7.1.2: Schools: "No one said anything"

Similarly to Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg (2023: 80), this research also found that schools were the only place where victim-survivors could be physically away from their controlling home environments, and hence they liked being at school. This did not necessarily mean that they enjoyed academic study or performed well academically, but, more significantly, they seemed to like a space devoid of familial control over their mobility and social interactions. Additionally, this was also a space where they subverted control scripts learnt at home, such as removing the headscarf (Gill, 2014):

> So come secondary school, I used to didn't like…academically wasn't great but I preferred school from home. I didn't like being at home. I used to wear my headscarf but as soon as I got to school, I used to take my headscarf off. (Sharmin)

Existing research has rightly identified frontline services including schools and social services to do more in terms of detection and prevention of forced marriage (Kazmirski et al., 2009). Practice guidelines for frontline services have undergone revision for schools, colleges and universities to be more proactive in spotting signs of forced marriage and make further referrals to safeguarding agencies

(police and/or social services) (HCHAC, 2008), and pick up signs of family control like daughters' clothing, behaviours, involvement in after-school activities (sports, music, drama). To this end, Mehreen expresses concern over never being asked in school as to why she never wore the prescribed uniform:

> I used to wear like a *salwar kameez*[4], a grey *salwar kameez* at school. And it just surprises me sometimes that that wasn't questioned as well. It kind of gets on my nerves that this abuse was going around but no one really helped me. (Mehreen)

Schools were places where victim-survivors re-positioned their identities outside their learnt understandings of performing race and culture (*Sharmin*); at the same time, they felt initial frustration when schools did not question the 'anomalies', i.e., wearing *salwar kameez* instead of prescribed uniform for English schools (*Mehreen*). It can be speculated that there are discrete forms of cultural stereotyping at play which allow schools to not probe further the topic of uniform, contributing to Mehreen's feelings of "no one helping her". Notwithstanding the Equality Act under which a dress code can not necessarily be imposed in schools in respect of a students' protected characteristics, this is also an example of political (in)correctness or stereotyping. Mehreen problematises the fact that school authorities never once questioned her for wearing *salwar kameez*.

Schools are likely to be one of the first sources of support, however, it is counterproductive when schools themselves are not proactive about detecting signs of forced marriage, especially because a large majority of those who face forced marriage are below the age of 18 (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023: 80). Idriss strongly suggests that "given the age, nature and diversity of the student body in modern day Britain, educational establishments should be required to educate students on HBA and forced marriages and where they can access support" (2018: 28). The HCHAC report did not make it an explicit requirement "for schools to educate students about HBA and forced marriage within the National Curriculum" (HCHAC, 2008: 30-36; Idriss, 2018). Indeed, schools with greater ethnic and racial diversity may not address these topics out of concerns of political (in)correctness, or fear of stereotyping, or fear of upsetting parents (Sanghera, 2009). Contrastingly, recent comic-based pedagogy addresses forced marriage by presenting the issue in sensitive, age-appropriate, and empowering ways (Baumeister and Carabine, 2024). This approach helps teach teenagers about forced marriage and supports their role as allies to those at risk or affected.

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[4] *salwar kameez* is a traditional combination dress comprising of long shirt, trousers, paired with a *dupatta* scarf, commonly worn throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Overall, what unfolds is a paradox: schools are the only places where victim-survivors might have the desire to seek formal help in implicit or explicit ways; or show signs of unusual behaviours which need further probing (i.e., removing headscarf or not wearing appropriate school uniform) – but these are not effectively picked up by schools. Therefore, while schools are likely to be sources of support, there is a significant need to make them "accessible" sources of support for students by engaging in dialogue about forced marriage and HBA and signposting pupils to further support.

### 7.1.3: Mental health support and role of doctors

Forced marriage and the concomitant physical and emotional stress of being in one lead to severe and often long-term mental health consequences for South Asian women including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm and suicide (Chantler et al., 2001; Batool, 2021; Rauf et al., 2013). Alongside dealing with depression, two victim-survivors also mentioned acts of self-harm: slitting wrists, spraying significant quantities of perfume directly into mouth and ingesting rat poison. Victim-survivors came in contact with health services whilst still being in the forced marriage or after having escaped. The mental health needs of victim-survivors warrant urgent action, yet, in practice they were often presented with significant waiting lists to attain counselling. Additionally, gender and race were also implicated when victim-survivors came in contact with health providers after leaving the forced marriage, as is evident in Aliyah's case below:

> I look for help through the services and I did have a problem when I left and I was asking for counselling because I had to wait a long time I said, "I can't wait for ten months. I have an eighteen-month baby. I am not mentally well. I need to be well for my little boy. I can't wait ten months"' They gave me, erm, an English man for counselling and when I went to the first session that is the worst thing they could have done after someone who is going through domestic abuse, sexual abuse, the last thing I wanted to do was be in the same room as a man, on my own. And then he said, 'I don't understand your religion, I don't understand your culture, but I will try'. (Aliyah)

Aliyah felt strongly about the gender of her counsellor because the nature of what she wanted to discuss in counselling would involve her potentially disclosing instances of sexual violence, along with the fact that her perpetrator was a man. Her feeling of discomfort with the counsellor was augmented due to the fact that he outrightly linked her experience of abuse to culture and religion from the offset,

projecting a stereotypical and racist response. While it may seem that he is unaware of how abuse manifests in racially minoritised communities, it is the causal link between religion and abuse which he latches on to that effectively positions himself as distanced from Aliyah's needs.

Normalisation of abuse and, as a result, deliberately not recording contents of victim disclosure also undermined service provision when victim-survivors made full disclosures and sought formal support from general practitioners. Having a doctor from the same ethnic and racial background proved to be disappointing for Aliyah who was asked to endure the routine abuses in her marriage:

> you know when I was in the marriage that time, I told you I had depression, and I did mention things to my doctor and he was Bengali. And he even said to me, 'Oh, you know…?' What did he say now? He said something like, 'You know, this happens in marriage, you just have to be patient. You don't want to tell your mum and dad because they will be ill.' And when I went to the family court after I had fled and he took me to Family Court because I had got a Protection Order against him for my son and me and I was looking in the doctor medical record I thought, 'I've got lots of proof because I mentioned all of this to the doctor, also the counsellor knows.' The doctor didn't put that down in the record, the discussions that we had. And he was a Bangladeshi doctor. (Aliyah)

The male doctor also dissuades her from accessing support through her parents by making her feel that she will be blamed if their health gets affected hearing the abuse she is suffering, or even her decision to leave the marriage. The doctor enacts a form of regulation akin to wider community members' responses to the knowledge of a woman seeking help in relation to domestic abuse (see 5. 3). This finding is important as it shows medical health practitioners' unwillingness to recognise and record domestic abuse in racially minoritised communities for the sake of prioritising women's perceived community membership, in turn effecting women's justice-seeking opportunities via legal routes. Aliyah's account indicates an alarming situation where both 'passive denial' (Romito, 2000) and outright normalisation of abuse are at work preventing appropriate mental health provision and onward referral. The situation is marked by not just the failure of her doctor to listen to Aliyah's accounts at face value and 'see the signs', but his conscious unwillingness to formally record this vital information, since it is not noteworthy to *him*. The Department of Health guidance mandates health practitioners to keep detailed records of discussions with patients and states that "when recording information about domestic abuse, staff should describe exactly what happened [...] use the patient's own words with quotation marks [...] record whether an injury and a victim's explanation for it are consistent [...] take photographs and sign and date them as proof of injuries" (Department of Health,

2017: 41). Aliyah's doctor did not do so, deliberately, which ended up harming Aliyah's court case as that record could have been used in criminal proceedings when her perpetrator was facing charges. This shows that the victimisation of racially minoritised women can be made to be invisible by health practitioners, particularly from the same ethnic and racial background as the women. South Asian women's intersectional identities constituting gender, marital status, culture and race are not integrated into health initiatives (Mackenzie et al., 2019) but are rather 'played on' by health professionals to prevent them from exiting contexts of abuse— highlighting a systemic failure in adequate protection.

Statutory guidelines govern how health practitioners respond to disclosures (Department of Health, 2017), but their responses suggest that either they are not aware of those guidelines, or they do not agree with them, and hence don't enforce them as seen in Aliyah's case above. Contrastingly, Roop's experience shows that where these guidelines are followed sensitively, a positive outcome is achieved:

> I went to my doctor, with bruises and everything. And I said, this is what's happening, and I never thought that's a bad thing. If my husband is hitting me, I wasn't thinking that's a bad thing because I thought this happens to everyone, you know. And when I spoke to my doctor, he said, no, this is wrong, and then he signposted me to refuge. (Roop)

Roop's male doctor debunked her assumption about the normalisation of abuse within marriage and made her aware of refuge services. However, health initiatives around mental health and physical signs of domestic abuse did not always elicit a disclosure of the broader context of forced marriage in which it occurred.

### 7.1.4: Refuge

Sharmin, Roop and Aliyah had mixed responses about their time in refuge. While it was a new and empowering experience for some, concerns were raised about the essentialist treatment of racially minoritised women by refuge workers. The following experience shared by Sharmin reflects the ways in which mainstream refuge services focus on the 'difference' first – race in this instance– rather than the intersectional relationship-based understanding of domestic abuse:

> [O]vernight we had to flee because there was an immediate threat to all my children's lives. We lived in a refuge. Refuge tried to feed me the same story … in [early 2000s] which was "poor victim, poor Sharmin, you've got an evil father who's trying to kill you, now I have got an evil man, evil ex-partner who is trying to kill you". And I rejected the story this time. In [early

2000s], it was fine, I was 18, I was young, I was naïve, I had a fetus inside me. I don't know right from wrong. [Years later], trying to feed me the same story, I thought I don't think so. I have got three more children, three more human beings that I am feeding, and you're feeding me the same nonsensical story that "I am the victim". (Sharmin)

The experience shared reflects frustration with the persistent and reductive narratives imposed by mainstream refuge services where domestic abuse in non-Western communities is causatively attributed to a "systemic cultural pathology" rooted in traditions and values specific to racially minoritised communities (Walker, 2020: 381). Institutional forms of racism entrenched in service provision can lead to racialised practices (Singh, 2019), as seen in Sharmin's case. The reliance on culturally essentialist narratives also overlooks the progress and changes in Sharmin's life, including her responsibilities as a mother of three additional children.

Despite a decade's gap between Sharmin's contact with the refuge services, some services still fall short. However, contemporary specialist 'by and for' services, which are led by and cater specifically to racially minoritised women (Anitha and Dhaliwal, 2019; Gill and Anitha, 2023), are addressing this gap. These services destabilise essentialist narratives around forced marriage and HBA, providing unique support that acknowledges the additional structural inequalities racially minoritised women face. They also offer specialised support for issues like mental health, acknowledging these as both contributing factors in abuse and barriers to seeking help (Larasi, 2013). Sharmin's account highlights the need for specialist refuge services that cater to racially minoritised women (Gill and Banga, 2008), focusing not only on their challenges but also on their resilience and self-reliance as they navigate formal sources of help.

Sharmin critiques the refuge services for consistently portraying her as a passive victim, a narrative she initially accepted as a 'young and naive' individual in the early 2000s, when she escaped a life-threatening attack by her father for thinking about leaving her first forced marriage. However, more than a decade later, as a more mature and experienced mother, escaping from her husband from her second forced marriage, she rejects this oversimplified and disempowering story. This repetition of the same "poor victim" narrative over a decade later suggests a lack of nuanced understanding of overlapping structures of control in racially minoritised women's life, before, during and after their forced marriage. Her problematisation of the use of the term 'victim' is an important finding here as it shows that she does not see herself as a "poor victim", or as someone who is passive or weak, as projected by the mainstream refuge service here. Those who are victimised may not understand themselves as passive or weak (Donovan and Barnes, 2021), and Sharmin's account shows how that

unfolds in the treatment of racially minoritised women. The "poor victim" story weaved, recycled and re-told to Sharmin confirms Razack's (2004: 136) contention that 'the morally superior West' sees men from minority communities as barbaric and evil, resulting in the problematic conceptualisation of minority women as 'passive victims' and 'in need of saving from their own deviant cultures' (Anitha and Gill, 2009). It is almost as if culture, rather than gender, is framed as the driving force behind being violent towards and/or killing people.

Selling the "poor victim" story is problematic in several ways. Such a response reflects a perception of the everyday lives of racially minoritised women as culturally backwards, seeing them as passive victims at every turn. This paternalistic view, drawing on colonial tropes, suggests that these women are universally under threat from their own inward-looking cultures, invoking a misguided mission to save and pity them. Additionally, demonisation of cultures or holding culturalist views about forced marriages others minority women, generating a distinction between "usual", "everyday" or "mainstream" domestic and family violence cases and those emerging from minority cultures. Detrimentally, the 'culturalisation of violence', unfolding in Sharmin's treatment above, leads to unmet support needs of "othered" racially minoritised women (Walker, 2020).

It is noteworthy that the same 'backward culture' attribution was made the second time Sharmin reached out to the refuge. To clarify, she was referred to two different refuges after her first and second forced marriage, reflecting the prevalence of an essentialist discourse around forced marriage. Failure to address the intersectional needs of racially minoritised victim-survivors is a direct outcome of the "poor victim" story. An intersectional feminist framework emphasising individual empowerment, agency, and the rejection of victimhood (Gill and Anitha, 2011), offers a distinct perspective on Sharmin's experience at the refuge. It can also be speculated that inadequate service response during her first encounter with the refuge increased her risk to re-victimisation.

On the other hand, other victim-survivors had some partially positive and empowering time in refuges. Roop received initial support from a mainstream refuge, underscoring the importance of these services during crisis points. Despite her experience with the refuge being relatively recent (see Table 4), she reflects on the lack of continued support once she returned home. Without ongoing support, she found herself vulnerable to the same pressures that initially led her to seek refuge:

> I think going to refuge opened my eyes how much support is available, but the only thing I would say is refuge when I came back on my house, they helped me up to that point. But as soon as I come back to my house, they just left me. There was no help after. And that's the

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time I probably needed more help. And I think that's why I gone back to my ex-husband again because I was struggling so much financially, you know, emotionally, all that. I think they let me down in that sense. They never rang me, they never checked if I'm okay with my boys. They thought oh, I'm going back to my house now, I'm fine. But I think if I had more support when I came back home with my boys, I probably would have never let him come back home and go back to same circle again and again. Yeah, I think that's where I felt like little bit let down. (Roop)

Importantly, this is an area where the process-based understanding of forced marriage and co-occurring domestic abuse can be foregrounded to enhance our understanding of the persistent and lifelong risks, abuse, and harm that victim-survivors face. Despite seeking and receiving formal help, they remain vulnerable to ongoing victimisation, highlighting the necessity of recognising that forced marriage and domestic abuse are not isolated incidents but continuous processes that inflict long-term psychological, emotional, and physical harm (Thiara and Gill, 2010; Chantler, Mirza and MacKenzie, 2023). It is crucial to acknowledge that victim-survivors of forced marriage often contend with not only the trauma of leaving but also with hostile families and communities who may pressure them to return to the marriage or who perpetuate abuse during the leaving process or after they have left (as discussed in Chapter 6). This hostility exacerbates their isolation from support networks, intensifying their need for comprehensive post-refuge support and care (Sanghera, 2009; Anitha, 2023).

Aliyah's accounts point to more positive and empowering experiences at the 'British, English-led refuge' she was in when seeking support for domestic abuse in her marriage. Interestingly, her experience below highlights a significant moment of inclusivity and sensitivity to cultural and religious practices within a refuge setting:

> I was at the refuge and that was a, you know, a British English led refuge and they understood it was Ramadan so they, they donated like, you know, rice, you know, flour the chapatis, the, the lentils, onions; they know about that, they donated that to each woman in the refuge, so even though they don't, you know, they're not religious those people, they knew, and no one had to ask them, they did that. So, actually for me, I found that like a positive experience (Aliyah)

Acts of cultural consideration contribute to a sense of belonging and respect within the refuge environment, as felt by Aliyah. In particular, her account shows that the refuge not only met her immediate practical needs, but also affirmed her cultural and religious identity. Although both women

came into contact with refuge services around the same time, when the policy context around forced marriage had significantly evolved, their experiences diverged sharply. Unlike Sharmin's negative experience, the refuge in Aliyah's case recognised and validated her cultural and religious identities. Such recognition helps counteract the feelings of marginalisation and invisibility these women often face in broader society (Anitha, 2023), fostering a space where they feel valued and seen. In terms of immediate and practical needs, Aliyah recounted her refuge proactively helping her with the legal side of her case: by allocating a solicitor, and swiftly securing necessary orders against her perpetrator:

> I got a Prohibitive Steps Order and a Non- molestation Order. And erm, that was quite, so I think that was quite straight forward because I was in the refuge so I got help from their solicitor and it was legal aid because I wasn't working so I wasn't earning and I was in the refuge fleeing from domestic abuse, you know, and I reported to the police or whatever, they need proof it is domestic abuse. So I got legal aid and because I was in the refuge I got a lot of help because of the refuge. So they got me in touch with the solicitor and I gave a statement to the solicitor, the solicitor went straight to the judge without notice. (Aliyah)

## 7.2: Practitioners' responses to forced marriage

In this section, findings from semi-structured interviews practitioners are discussed. The table below provides information about which services were involved in this research:

| Nature of service provision | Number of practitioners |
|---|---|
| Police | n = 3 police officers |
| Refuge provider | n = 1 refuge staff member |
| Specialist 'by and for' organisation | n = 1 staff member |
| Local council | n = 1 domestic abuse coordinator |
| LGBTQ+ domestic abuse and HBA service provider | n = 1 staff member |

*Table 5: Information about Service Providers in this Sample*

Practitioners in this study were police staff from police forces in the UK; staff member from a LGBTQ+ domestic abuse and HBA charity, a 'by and for' specialist organisation, a refuge service for victims of domestic abuse and a local council in the UK. 'By and for' services are specifically managed by racially minoritised women, both as staff and trustees, and possess deep understanding and expertise in the forms of violence and abuse within their communities. They have the necessary experience, knowledge, and skills to address and overcome barriers to accessing support. These services offer specialised assistance to women from these communities, hence the term 'by and for' services (WGI, 2020). These organisations, shaped by intersectionality, focus on the compounded effects of structural inequalities on victims-survivors (Anitha and Dhaliwal, 2019; Larasi, 2013).

The interviews inquired about knowledge of forced marriage, including probing the difference between arranged and forced marriage, how 'honour' is understood by practitioners, identifying who can be subjected to forced marriage and how it impacts victim-survivors in different ways owing to their intersectional identities. Interviews also covered some operational barriers to dealing with forced marriage cases in relation to how it is recorded by police; and confrontations with 'race anxiety'. Practitioners also addressed interventions offered such as the use of Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs) and experiences of multi-agency partnership work.

While the practitioner data in this study suggest signs of more informed and empathetic engagement with forced marriage cases compared to earlier victim-survivor experiences, this must be read with caution. The sample is small and potentially reflects pockets of best practice rather than systemic transformation. As such, these insights are enriched by—and must be interpreted alongside—recent reviews of policy and practice that highlight continuing gaps and contradictions within statutory and voluntary services (Imkaan, 2017; Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023; Chantler, Mirza and Mackenzie, 2022).

### 7.2.1: Working knowledge and awareness of forced marriage

The research finds that practitioners often discussed HBA alongside their understanding of forced marriage, viewing both within the broader context of domestic abuse. Situating forced marriage within domestic abuse conceptualisations can enable a coordinated local response which adequately makes use of existing resources and capacity (Kazmirski et al., 2009: 29). However, this was not a standalone aspect of practitioners' understanding of forced marriage in this research. Participants went beyond

domestic abuse and forced marriage definitions to assess how consent is constructed for individual cases along with the perceived or actual threats vocalised by victim-survivors. A unique finding of this research is that it foregrounds practitioners' inclination to identify the motivations for the impending or actual forced marriage. As is evident below, there is more to practitioners' understanding of forced marriage than using official definitions as a frame of reference; they concern themselves with victim-survivors' feelings of fear of punishment or "consequences" for doing something "wrong" or "shameful" such as saying no to a family sanctioned marriage or seeking external help:

> Because we're a charity, we're not the police or social services, we believe that everybody has a unique experience of domestic abuse, forced marriage, and everybody's experiences are unique. We will accept, for the purpose of defining forced marriage, that an individual who is at risk of or who has experienced forced marriage is somebody who has not consented to that marriage to take place, who fears they are being tricked into a marriage. Who fears that if they don't adhere to being coerced into a marriage, there will be consequences for the guilt for the family or for themselves. But there is, obviously, a generic definition of forced marriage, but we believe that everybody's experiences are completely unique. So although we could say this person is at risk of or has experienced forced marriage, and it fits under the definition of 'forced marriage', we kind of would want to know what that feels like for that person, because everybody is different. (White British female refuge staff)

It is noteworthy that the refuge staff makes a distinction between how forced marriage is understood by their charity (voluntary) and statutory services. Statutory services, constrained by time and resources, often focus solely on consent (Gill and Anitha, 2009). Due to time and resource constraints, the latter might be more inclined to only focus on formulations of consent. For example, inconsistent use of risk assessments in domestic abuse cases highlights this issue (Myhill, Hohl & Johnson, 2023). However, there were accounts from police staff demonstrating their strive to gain a better understanding of motivations for the perpetration of forced marriage and potential punishments for fleeing from them:

> I think people don't get that with an HBA incident, you're not just dealing with that one individual. You're dealing with the family and the extended community. And actually, there's you know, people are probably looking in and thinking they've [perpetrators] done the right thing. I think that victims face a forever risk, isn't it? That risk doesn't go away or dissipate, because, you know, if you've shamed your family and you've got a, a partner outside of the

community or you turn down someone chosen for you or that marriage, you've brought dishonour. They're not going to stop looking to you. (White British male police officer)

The above comment about victim-survivors' facing "forever risk" alludes to the longevity of the threat of and/or actual punishment directed towards victim-survivors by their families and wider community. Importantly, the 'forever' nature of risks experienced by victims-survivors resonates with the main argument of this thesis, advancing the recognition of 'forever risk' that accompanies the lifelong abuse charted in the previous chapters. The desire to punish women indefinitely for bringing dishonour is integrated into the wider community as well (Idriss, 2017), in turn significantly preventing women from rebuilding their lives even after they are moved away from their families, i.e., their perpetrators. Practitioners show an understanding of this community element as a distinct feature of HBA and its difference to domestic abuse (ibid), as seen below:

> In the context of domestic abuse, in a familial relationship, we support people, men, men or women, who are fleeing, usually, one person, but in the context of forced marriage, they are fleeing very often an entire community. And the community will actively seek them, and they will try all sorts of means to try and find them. You know, in the case of forced marriage, the family never moves on. (White British female refuge staff)

In relation to sensitising frontline responders to potential risks and to better identify, record and support a forced marriage case, going beyond definitional understanding of forced marriage was encouraged. Substantially, this meant posing questions to the victim-survivors to better understand the risk and the nature of abuse they face:

> I think the definitions are out there. But what does it actually mean to this person right in front of you? So I would say to the officers to ask the victim 'if you say no to this forced marriage, what would happen'? 'Oh I can't say no, this will happen, that will happen. Right, well you're being forced'. If you say no to this marriage what will happen, I can say no, nothing will happen, no violence, no abuse. So it's just about screening. We need to screen a bit better to get a good understanding of the risks. (South Asian female police officer)

This research reveals a more informed group of practitioners who understand that asking targeted questions is essential for providing an effective response (Mahil, 2020). These questions centre on the issue of 'honour' to identify triggers which compromise or can potentially compromise 'honour'. While these responses demonstrate promising levels of individual practitioner insight, they may not reflect broader systemic practice. Wider reviews, including by HMICFRS (2022), suggest that many

professionals still rely heavily on surface-level risk indicators and fail to grasp the longer-term coercive context of forced marriage, particularly in racially minoritised communities. Despite the timeframe differences between victim-survivors' help-seeking accounts (from almost 15-20 years ago) and practitioner interviews, and acknowledging the small sample size of practitioners, practitioners also highlighted victim-survivors' feelings of guilt for going against family and effectively leaving all social support connections in the family and community which can be a barrier to timely help-seeking:

> Women and men who come into our service, because of forced marriage really struggle to want to bring shame on their families, and they feel guilty and they feel embarrassed. And I think, because of those feelings, people have told us that this is, you know, that's why they got to the airport in the first place. They got to the airport, you know. They leave at the very last minute. The very, very last minute. You know, they know this is coming. They can sense it, but they try, they really, really struggle to go against their family and their culture and their community and their friends and their religion. And all this they really struggled to go against because they're having to leave everything. Absolutely everything. And they know that. They know when they leave, they leave everything, and that is a very, very tough decision. And they really do struggle with guilt. (White British female refuge staff)

Identifying the motivations and punishments in relation to risk assessment for forced marriage also provide an insight into practitioners' understanding of 'honour' and shame. One practitioner personalised her own understanding of 'honour' and shame by sharing an anecdote of what invited punishment for 'bad behaviour' by parents, demonstrating a sentiment common across the majority white populace as well:

> I think what's been really helpful is kind of really bringing it back to basics almost. And because there's 'honour' in every community and it's just about how important it is how we know what, or how much factor. I mean, for example, my mom she caught me walking down the road one time when I was quite young, I got some fish and chips from the shop and eating them walking along. And she was absolutely horrified by that, you know, how that would, you know, people would think about her, you know, her daughter walk along with this packet of fish and chips eating them in the streets sort of thing. But obviously, you know there are consequences, but so that very kind of minor level that 'honour' and shame. It's there with everybody because we all have ideas about how we want our children you know, our family to behave and things. But obviously, when we talk about HBA, we kind of do perceive it to be that much higher level. So much, much more important. And also, the fact that you know, the

extremes that somebody would go to, to kind of redress that 'honour'. (White British female domestic abuse coordinator)

The above comment sheds light on how walking down the street eating fish and chips invites a "minor level" of shame, punishment or "consequences" akin to how victim-survivors of forced marriage and HBA vocalise fear of punishment. She later points to the severe risks associated with bringing shame on a "higher level". Sentiments of shame, embarrassment and guilt for the perceived act of dishonour underpin perpetrators use of 'honour' and shame as an excuse to conduct forced marriage or other offences linked to HBA (Gill, 2014; Gangoli et al., 2023). Practitioners' understanding of 'honour' and shame is also derived from perpetrators' statements around what actions or 'misconduct' diminish their status in the community, for example: adultery, being 'too westernised', homosexuality (Welchman and Hossain, 2005):

> So police officers will see it as a terminology and they will be aware that there are offences linked to HBA. But unless you sit down with them in a training room, like ok, let's break down what 'honour' means, where does it come from, why are people potentially doing it? This is what we're dealing with- you've got offenders in prison given life sentences for murdering their children, or their wives or their husbands, due to 'honour'. Because when you think about the motivation, it isn't adultery all the time. It might have been that they've been accused of adultery or they've been accused of this Western lifestyle. But when you actually interview or read what perpetrators say, what they will tell you is that because it embarrassed me in my community or that they've taken the 'honour' away. So that's what you got to break down with practitioners. (South Asian female 'by and for' organisation staff member)

## 7.2.2 Recognising and recording a forced marriage

Practitioners also emphasise the need to determine if they are dealing with an arranged marriage or forced marriage case. This is also a context where elements of consent are intertwined with the victim-survivors' fears of punishment and the consequences of refusing the marriage. There remains some confusion amongst practitioners in this study concerning whether a case pertains to forced or arranged marriage, and some practitioners point out the ways in which there are missed opportunities to probe the difference between the two, as encapsulated in the following comment:

"What we tend to miss sometimes is we understand what an arranged marriage is and we understand what a forced marriage is and we understand the difference between the two, but I think sometimes a victim might talk to us about an arranged marriage and we don't necessarily ask the right questions to understand the difference between the two". (White British female police officer)

She later explains that individual frontline officers need further training in determining victim-survivors' fear around saying no to a marriage brought to them by their parents, allowing them to better assess risks and differentiate between an arranged and forced marriage:

"We need to train them to ask the question "what would happen if you said no to that marriage?" to have an understanding about really whether it is an arranged or a forced marriage. Because some victims will say to the officer "well, it's because my parents are arranging a marriage for me and something's not going so well", and actually we just think about it being an arranged marriage and domestic abuse, we don't actually say "well, if you said no to that marriage, what actually would happen?". And then really understanding whether it's arranged or forced and the difference between the two. So I think there are some situations that we perhaps don't necessarily always ask the right questions, and we're not professionally curious enough." (White British female police officer)

Practitioners also note that individuals reaching out for help do not necessarily identify themselves as victim-survivors of forced marriage but were instead making contact due to fear of negative repercussions for saying no to parents' choice of marriage partner. For instance, one participant noted that "it's very difficult for people perhaps to recognise always what's happening, and then actually reach out for help" (White British female council worker). Notwithstanding the complexities of the 'slippage' between arranged and forced marriage (Gangoli, Razak and McCarry, 2006), this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the control that begins well before the marriage itself which may hinder victim-survivors from fully recognising their marriage as forced (ibid). Ongoing abuse in the 'before' stage creates an environment where coercion is normalised, making it difficult for these women to distinguish between voluntary and forced actions. For instance, consistent pressure to conform to familial expectations to uphold 'honour' can obscure their understanding of consent, as compliance is ingrained as a survival mechanism rather than a voluntary choice. This thesis outlines that in the context of forced marriages, control is exerted by the natal family, the husband, husband's family and the wider community. This means that by the time the marriage is forced, the victim-survivor's agency has been significantly compromised, and their ability to recognise the coercion is

diminished. The importance of the findings of this research can be related to how victim-survivors are often caught in a double bind where resisting the marriage can lead to severe social and familial repercussions, including ostracism, intensified abuse and even in some, threats to kill them. The fear of such consequences often outweighs the perceived agency they might have to reject the marriage, making it challenging to perceive the marriage as forced. These complexities can make it difficult for police officers to be confident about how to respond, especially when individuals themselves do not categorise their situation as 'forced' or lacking consent:

> if you were to explain the dynamics and complexities of what the distinction is and this is the problem with forced marriages, at what point does an arranged marriage become a forced marriage? And actually, many people that are you know, victims of this don't see themselves as victims. So it's about unpicking what they have been through and about the choice and capacity to choose that they had and whether they truly consented or that they did it because they felt that they had to do it. (White British male police officer)

However, research continues to show that awareness of forced marriage remains inconsistent across statutory services. As Gill and Anitha (2023) argue, a reliance on culturalist framings and a lack of intersectional analysis often leads to both over-recording (misclassifying all South Asian cases as HBA) and under-recording (failing to identify coercion when victims do not use the language of force). Similarly, reports by HMICFRS (2022) and Imkaan (2017) point to uneven implementation of safeguarding practices and inadequate follow-up, particularly in areas without specialist services. These findings underscore that while some practitioners demonstrate nuanced understandings, structural and institutional failings persist at scale. This research finds that to navigate the uncertainties between whether it is a case of arranged or forced marriage, practitioners especially gave importance to asking more 'probing' questions to determine the lack of consent or existence of coercion in victim-survivors' accounts. For example, in the following excerpt, the probing approach focuses on the impacts of disobeying parents in order to better understand the degree of duress and/or fear of consequences and threat the victim-survivor is under:

> So, it's really interesting. One victim said "my parents are arranging my marriage, and I am not really happy about it" – so the "I am not happy about it" part was important. So, I went back to the officer and said, "she said she isn't happy about it, that isn't free and full consent". And the officer said, "hold on a minute, she didn't use the word force". And I said, "she doesn't need to". And that's the thing, when it's so subtle it can be missed. We grasped the

opportunity, it was picked up. But if we're not doing this dip sampling and consultation with officers, I think then the victims will slip through the gaps." (South Asian female police officer)

The above quote illustrates that individuals often reach out to the police when they sense something is wrong, even if they do not explicitly use terms like 'force' or 'forced marriage'. It points towards the need to recognise these subtle clues and ask questions to determine whether coercion or lack of consent is involved, and how it manifests within the individual's family. Such a probing approach can be strengthened by the findings presented in the previous chapters to understand how the process might play out in individual cases by asking questions about family dynamics and family power. As can be seen, officer uncertainty can arise when victim-survivors do not explicitly say that they were being forced into a marriage, often leading to inaccurate recording of forced marriage incidents.

It is also observed that specialist knowledge of a few officers experienced in investigating forced marriage cases enables police staff to double-check their understanding of forced marriage, increase frontline officers' confidence in recognising a potential forced marriage and validate their approach to support victim-survivors. This is indicative of a 'safety net' within police forces that takes a second look at the logs of call handlers, supervisors, investigation officers, first responders, safeguarding officers to get the recording of such cases right (Dutt et al., 2024, forthcoming). It can be noticed below that a pre-existing knowledge base within police forces is routinely accessed by officers to strengthen their ongoing efforts to accurately identify, record and respond to HBA cases:

> So, we have got a couple of people that are specifically trained in our safeguarding team that understands HBA and forced marriage. And we keep in touch with them quite regularly. We call them like a subject matter expert if you like. The majority of our training we really focus our training on our call handlers, people who manage our 999 and 101 calls, the people who work in our front offices, and our frontline responses officers, because they are the people most likely to receive that initial disclosure. So, if that initial disclosure's going to be made to the police in the first instance, it's because a victim's walked into a police station and said 'I'm worried about this' or 'this is happening to me' or they've called the police and response officers have turned up. So, it's really important that they understand and recognise the signs. (White British female police officer)

When speaking about recording practices for forced marriage and HBA, police officers emphasise the importance of accurate recording from the onset. This often means noting down all relevant information, assessing risk as part of the 'one chance rule' and putting the right HBA and forced

marriage tags to ensure that other officers within the response team can pick up key information and provide the right support while supervising call logs (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). Sometimes, policing efforts are also geared towards not asking victim-survivors to re-tell their accounts of abuse:

> Getting the flagging and tagging right. If you can flag a HBA victim once, you've done a great job because they probably won't engage with you the first time, but the next officer that they call, we have flagged that victim, so the next officer already knows what they're dealing with and that's great. So, you don't want to screen the victim every time you're dealing with them. Do it well once. Understand them and then we can move on. (South Asian female police officer)

There is also evidence that practitioners, particularly police staff, navigate the intersections of race and gender, and confront the practice of recording domestic abuse in racially minoritised communities as HBA (Gangoli et al., 2023a). This substantially relates to how the police positions forced marriage as a race debate first, and a gendered issue later. In particular, this research highlights the tendency of police to perceive domestic abuse in racialised relationships as a cultural issue rather than violence against women or domestic abuse:

> Police officers put flags in that are incorrect and that they don't understand and just mark up a domestic abuse scenario that involves an Asian couple for instance. And then they put, you know, make an incorrect and evidence assumption just because they're Asian, that must be HBA related whereas you know, there's no 'honour' issue there. So, there is an overinflation sometimes in the recording tickets, but actually there's also a big issue of people not recognising the risk and not flagging things up properly anyway. So, the data is far from perfect, whichever way we look at it, but it's what we have. (White British male police officer)

The mis-recording pattern discussed above wherein "a domestic abuse scenario that involves Asian couples" gets recorded as HBA even when there is "no 'honour' issue there" underpins an institutional logic or discourse which homogenises all forms of violence against racially minoritised women (Gangoli et al., 2023a). There is a need to problematise the police logic and set of discourses around acting on the 'racialised' individual rather than their gendered identity (Khazaei, 2024). Attributing gendered violence to culture, race, religion, faith or ethnicity also impacts the 'separation' of cases emerging from racially minoritised communities, creating a form of "parallel universe" for them (Siddiqui, 2014). An intersectional assessment of the recording strategies of forced marriage and HBA which

problematise police discourse centred on victim-survivors' race and culture rather than gender is evident in the account above. Attending to the intersectional workings of structural systems of oppression produces more accurate recording, identification of and responses to forced marriage, simultaneously improving lives of all victim-survivors of domestic abuse in and outside forced marriages, even in majority white communities. Furthermore, such an approach has wider implications for policy and practice to shift the positioning of forced marriage and HBA as violence against women issues first. This research has shown that racially minoritised women experience varying and multi-dimensional forms of abuse before, during and after a forced marriage – and categorising it all as HBA oversimplifies their experience of abuse, forging a "collective victimhood" in a "parallel universe". Practitioners in this research show an understanding of how this can cause not just recording discrepancies, but also inadequate risk assessment and protection when victim-survivors first call in.

Police recording processes have to navigate the intersections of race, culture and gender when presented with a caller from a racially minoritised background when they do not use "keywords" such as "HBA", "victim", "forced marriage". There is a need to not only be aware of triggers, as noted earlier in this chapter, but also to be curious about the particularities arising from other family members involved and the nuanced nature of victim-survivors' experience. As the following quote suggests, victim-led terminology is different to practitioner-led terminology and further training is warranted for police to be more informed about the particularities, subtleties and nuances of forced marriage and related HBA practices, and which incorporates victim-survivors' terminology. It also points to how forced marriage and HBA might be under-recorded in some police forces as a result of not spotting the influence of 'honour', potentially skewing data concerning racially minoritised women:

> So, we would be in a position of privilege if victims of HBA come in and call us and say that they are victims of HBA. They don't term it in the same way that we use the terminology. So, we have victims who will come forward and say that they are victims of abuse from their family, we just need to be better as officers picking it out of the DA pot and flagging it as FM or HBA. (South Asian female police officer)

### 7.2.3 Pockets of good practice around overcoming 'race anxiety'

At times, practitioners' accounts discuss nervousness when presented with issues of race or culture out of fear of being labelled racist or culturally insensitive. 'Race anxiety' refers to "individual and

collective (institutional and state level) anxiety about how to intervene in relation to minoritised peoples, particularly in the context of abuse and other sensitive topics" (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011: 357). The fear and shame around being called racist or culturally insensitive can generate a silencing effect, so as to prevent accusations of being racist. This silencing effect underpins the failure to intervene by service providers and can contribute to perpetration of abuse within minority communities to go unchallenged (Batsleer et al., 2002; Chantler and Gangoli, 2011).

The findings in relation to race anxiety reveal the prevalence of it still, but also a way to overcome it by juxtaposing violence against women in minority cultures with that in majority cultures. An example of this is shared below where the practitioner draws a contrast with similar manifestations in white communities, and prompts service response by destabilising culture and foregrounding child safeguarding needs:

> Sometimes when you're there with other practitioners, they will say that 'I don't want to offend or don't really understand a lot about it'. Or they might hear a new word and be like 'oh I don't quite understand what that means, so what if I say something wrong?'. And I suppose my question is always back to them. You've got a 14-year-old white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, telling you that she is being forced to marry by her dad- what would you do? And when you ask that question to practitioners, they will be very clear and say that I will follow the safeguarding procedures. And this is exactly what you need to be doing here-because this is a child protection issue. (South Asian female 'by and for' organisation staff member)

The example shared above by the practitioner discusses how people's ideas about ethnicity, race and culture can be flexible and adaptable. This flexibility can help overcome the resistance to thinking about forced marriage as something that can happen outside of minority communities (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011). Parallels were also drawn with influences of 'honour' in majority white communities:

> "There's not enough understanding that it's not just a South Asian issue, there's so many communities that could be affected. White British people can also be affected by 'honour'. So, we have safeguarded white British victims who are girls who have had relationships with boys, from a community where they have been strict 'honour' codes." (South Asian female police officer)

Aside from integrating service responses within wider violence against women and girls strategy, practitioners also spoke about the need to be curious and not afraid about the overlapping contexts

of culture, power and abuse. As outlined below, safeguarding framings, instead of culturalist framings, allow officers to alleviate potential accusations of racism, while still being able to chart the influence of 'honour' and shame in these contexts:

> And I think another thing you have to sort of challenge is you have to get people to care about it, which is what I always say. You have to get people out there to be champions for these issues, and not be afraid to talk about it. Not be afraid... if someone's going to push back and say 'you're out you're stigmatising me' and 'you're being racist' is to turn around and turn that on its head and challenge it because we know we are coming from a safeguarding perspective and that we have a duty to protect vulnerable, girls in particular, that are, you know, are impacted by a vulnerability that's specific to the 'honour' code. (White British male police officer)

The intersection of gender, power and race is addressed from a safeguarding perspective whilst still being aware of women's racial identities in a cultural context (Patel and Siddiqui, 2010: 109). It is noteworthy that all police staff in this research– white and from racialised communities themselves – are considerably astute about the issue of forced marriage. They have awareness around how to improve the response-side, and to tackle potential hindrances relating to the cultural and racial context of this issue. Even though these are a small number of police officials (a result of sampling and voluntary participation in the research), there is certainly a level of competency which has not been commonly seen in the field of policing HBA and/or forced marriage (Gill and Harrison, 2016; Mulvihill et al., 2019; Aplin, 2019; 2021). Interestingly, the police here are critical of their fellow officers who lack the training or confidence to address forced marriage effectively. They are encouraging these officers to move beyond focusing solely on race and racial discourses around forced marriage, and instead prioritise a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding. This change in mindset among the police in this research is a clear example of how they are challenging and overcoming race anxiety.

However, this was not always an easy undertaking. Overcoming race anxiety and potential accusations of racism might sometimes create contexts of knowledge production which reproduce stigmatisation of marginalised communities (Bhavnani, 1993). The risk of further racism was felt by the practitioner below when the content on gender oppression in their presentation was directly linked with the specific minority community they worked with:

> In quite a lot of presentations, community leaders will get quite upset, you know, like, 'are you saying we're all like committing domestic abuse'? I mean, they were very polite, but you know

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what I mean? It's been sort of, 'are you saying this is a South Asian problem'? Whereas actually, we weren't saying that at all. What we're saying is, you know, it'll affect the South Asian community in the same way as it affects everybody. So, that's why we want to kind of talk about these things. So, it has...you know, a lot of the time it was kind of like being gently, gently and kind of how you phrase things. And obviously, we're trying to work alongside the leader because there's no point if you alienate the community and the leaders, then you're never going to make any progress. So, it's about being sensitive, but at the same time really trying to get the message across and really kind of understanding. (White British female domestic abuse coordinator)

In general, violence against women is a sensitive topic which further becomes uncomfortable to speak about when situated in the context of specific communities (Gill and Harrison, 2016). The practitioner above talks about revising their terminology in a way that the corresponding oppressions of women from majority groups is also recognised to prevent fuelling pathologisation of racially minoritised women and their cultures. This account supports the idea that overcoming race anxiety further encompasses the need to work with community leaders from minority communities, while being cognisant that the category of leaders may also include self-appointed leaders who might not represent views/interests of women and girls (Idriss, 2020).

An important finding of this research is that working in a geographical location with racial and ethnic diversity seems to decrease race anxiety. A combination of skillset, such as the experience of working in a racially diverse city, previous experience of supporting victim-survivors from minority communities and attaining a "relatively good understanding" of structural and power imbalances in those communities, along with the knowledge of multi-agency partnership work, instills a sense of 'cultural competence' in officers (Mahil, 2020; Dutt et al, 2024 forthcoming). The following account explicates this further and demonstrates how this increases officers' confidence in dealing with forced marriage cases:

But what the benefits of working within a really multicultural community or city is that you are, you probably have slightly more cultural competence, for example, than somebody who doesn't. So, I wouldn't describe myself as being necessarily massively culturally competent, but I've got a relatively good understanding of different communities, and what issues might be in different communities. No, not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but I work in a multicultural area. And I can understand the issues and I know the risks. And I know that I can go and seek help with a partner agency, and I can have a conversation with Children's Social

Care, Adult Social Care, or Education, and they will also understand those risks and those issues. If you've got somebody, for example, from Southeast Asian community, who's living in a predominantly White British area, and all the professionals in that area are White British, and they're not experienced in dealing with people from another community or understanding somebody else's faith or their perspective, then are they really going to really understand the risks or spot the signs? or have any sort of sense of "I really need to do something about that"? Who do I go and speak to? Who do I talk to? What's our working relationship, like? So how are we going to respond to this issue, because they're not experienced. (White British female police officer)

While this section highlights valuable examples of professional reflexivity and cultural confidence in safeguarding responses, these should not be seen as indicative of widespread institutional reform. The willingness of some officers to challenge race anxiety and reframe forced marriage as a safeguarding concern may reflect localised good practice—often shaped by prior experience or urban diversity—rather than evidence of systemic change. National reviews and survivor-led critiques (Gill and Anitha, 2023; HMICFRS, 2022; Chantler et al., 2022) consistently show that cultural hesitancy, inadequate training and reluctance to engage with racially minoritised communities continue to undermine effective intervention. These findings suggest that while some practitioners are moving toward more culturally confident safeguarding, structural issues remain deeply embedded in statutory responses.

### 7.2.4 Multi-agency responses and safeguarding

There was a push for co-ordination of multi-agency responses as a result of victim-survivors making disclosures to formal sources of support. Police officers in the practitioner sample unanimously maintain that direct disclosures to police are uncommon. Direct disclosures are more commonly made to third sector organisations who then engage with statutory services to meet victim-survivors' immediate safety and support needs. A range of agencies being involved in victim safeguarding as a result of referrals made is common across the sample.

Immediate safeguarding responses mentioned by practitioners included: making victim-survivors aware of their options (investigations for the purposes of criminal prosecution or "just" keeping them safe/ away from perpetrators or making the threat of forced marriage go away); quashing any surveillance measures enforced by perpetrators; arranging emergency refuge accommodation,

discussing the potentialities of using a Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO) and eventually applying for it; developing 'codewords' to ensure safe ways of communicating with service providers whilst at the family home; referring them to specialist organisations; placing forced marriage flags and markers on Police National Computers; informing the receiving police force about the background to the case when moving a victim-survivor from one police force to another. It has been previously noted that forced marriage flags are under-used by professionals (Kazmirski et al., 2009: 32; Gangoli et al., 2023a). Increased use of forced marriage markers by professionals enhances the capacity of local agencies to identify and respond to cases of forced marriage more effectively, substantially aiding multi-agency partnership work. Additionally, the proactive use of markers helps in early detection, which is essential to provide timely support to potential victim-survivors and prevent the escalation of their 'before' stage, i.e., the coercion and control experienced in the run-up to forced marriages. However, while these developments point to pockets of improved practice, they should not be interpreted as signs of widespread systemic change. Recent evaluations continue to show that the use of FMPOs and safeguarding flags remains inconsistent across regions (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). In particular, race anxiety and fears of being perceived as culturally insensitive continue to affect decision-making, especially in areas where specialist training or community-based organisations are lacking (Imkaan, 2017; Chantler et al., 2023). This reinforces the importance of caution in drawing broader conclusions from these localised examples: without sustained, system-wide change, such promising practices risk remaining the exception rather than the norm.

Referrals might be made by agencies who are most likely to be the initial points of contact for victim-survivors such as schools, social workers and health practitioners, as highlighted in section 7.1. In essence, multi-agency responses are facilitated by these agencies which are further picked up by police. One practitioner mentioned how victim-survivors often find it challenging to not only disclose their circumstances to voluntary and statutory organisations, but also to make that decision at the very last minute when their worst fears start to be realised:

> Those that are at risk of HBA and forced marriage, things get very bad before they perhaps leave, and it takes them an incredible amount of courage to speak to somebody about that. They would, perhaps, talk to a health visitor or a social worker. We have taken people straight from Heathrow Airport, because they felt they were at risk of being taken out of the country for forced marriage. So, we take individuals who feel they are at risk of forced marriage mainly because the police or another agency has become involved and they then get brought into our refuges. (White British female refuge worker)

However, as outlined in section 7.1, these same organisations —social care, education and health— can also show failures to intervene or 'spot the signs' of abuse, violence or neglect in victim-survivors' childhood, possibly leading to a lack of trust. This is important to note because police significantly rely on safeguarding referrals made by the agencies mentioned earlier. A 'best-case scenario' of schools making referrals on behalf of young people is outlined below:

> So, schools contact us and say 'well, we're really worried about this child, they should've come back from the holiday three weeks ago and they haven't come back, so can you help'. So at various stages, various people speak to us. And because we are very heavily involved in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, that's when we have a very key role, not only with forced marriage offences, lots of different offences which can be false imprisonment, abduction, sexual offences, a lot of different crimes under this umbrella of HBA and FM. (South Asian female police officer)

To this end, inter-agency information gathering and sharing of statistical forced marriage data for an integrated multi-agency response to forced marriage is considered fundamental. The following quote refers to social care, education and health practitioners as the "eyes and ears" of multi-agency case responses, which ideally should result in accurate identification, recording and sharing of information concerning forced marriage victim-survivors:

> So, safeguarding is, you know, everyone's responsibility and it's a language that you know, we have in common with other professionals. So, we're coming at it from a you know, encouraging information sharing encouraging, you know, a multi-agency response to risk. You know, you're on the same page as your partners in health and social care and in education. and I think this is where our partnership work comes in. We need to be making sure that those I would call the eyes and ears you know, your teachers, your health professional, social workers, your medical professionals, your GPs and nurses they, they identify a concern and share it through the normal referral pathways and then that information is shared with police, and it doesn't get stuck behind a gatekeeper. (White British male police officer)

There are instances where practitioners attempt to ascertain whether these "eyes and ears" have sufficient awareness, information and confidence to deal with forced marriage cases. Their capacity to 'spot the signs', ask the right questions, demonstrate professional curiosity to be able to carry out an informed and thorough risk assessment is brought up by the practitioner below:

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I also think there may need to be more awareness of professionals on how to start conversations with people if they are concerned that that person may be at risk of forced marriage or HBA. It may be like the health visitor, for example. You know, do all health visitors know what to look out for? Do they know what support is there for somebody? Do they feel confident enough, as a professional, to start a conversation with an individual? And do professionals understand what risks are involved when somebody is choosing to leave? Because the most dangerous time for somebody is when they are leaving, because the perpetrators will not want them to leave and will do everything to try and stop them leaving. (White British female refuge worker)

This understanding underpinning multi-agency work also brings to light individual agencies which need an improved response at individual level — for example, schools picking up on signs of forced marriage (see Baumeister et al., 2023) — for it to later develop into an integrated multi-agency response. Lack of knowledge or failure to intervene on the part of one agency can lead to "under-utilisation of available protective and preventative responses, further creating 'protection gaps' for victim-survivors" (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023: 88).

All practitioners in this research considered multi-agency forced marriage training to be vital in raising awareness of forced marriage warning signs and developing strategic responses. Capacity-building initiatives included training of frontline staff including social workers, new police trainees and cadets, response officers, call handlers, teachers, medical health professionals and child protection officers in colleges/universities (College of Policing, 2021). Improved information gathering is considered to be a knock-on effect of adequate forced marriage training. This training is predominantly conducted and facilitated by national voluntary organisations and 'by and for' specialist services to attune frontline workers to the nature, scale and adequate response of forced marriage. One police officer reports that proactive staff training led to 'in-house' training facilitated by HBA and forced marriage specialists in the police force, which influenced how new officers were being trained. Individual force experts' knowledge cascades down to their active involvement in training *all* police staff about forced marriage (Gangoli et al, 2023a). The following comment summarises this approach and demonstrates how a co-ordinated and integrated response is developed through ongoing staff training:

We need a professional response from people that are there to pick up and identify these signals and signs. It's making sure how do we make sure that our frontline staff are trained properly, and they know what they're looking for? How do we influence the training of teachers, social workers, and nurses? How do we then encourage them to share information?

So, this is where we as essential strategic team will come in. So, we've influenced the training of all new police recruits. So, So, it was done all in house by [police force] training. (White British male police officer)

At times, safeguarding measures progress and shift at multiple points in victim-survivors' formal help-seeking journey. Risk assessment strongly influence the kind of multi-agency response required in any particular situation, ranging from victim-survivors requiring safe channels of communications with police to involving health practitioners to create a private and safe space for the police to meet with victim-survivors, particularly when their passports are taken away by family members. Additionally, police officials consistently use the Police National Computer to tag at-risk persons so that their case history can be accessed by police forces across the country and other members in law enforcement. Practitioners see this as a particularly useful safeguarding exercise providing consistency across statutory service providers about victim-survivors' individual circumstances. More widely, it can potentially enable others in positions to support victim-survivors but outside the jurisdiction of the original police force to ensure victim safety if they were found by their families.

The following account notes an individual-level safeguarding step taken by one police force where they double up on safeguarding by sharing risk-assessment notes and information on a one-to-one basis with the receiving police force (area where the victim-survivor is being moved):

So, what we just make sure that we do is that, if certainly in Avon and Somerset, if we're moving a, a victim from our force area to another force area we would make sure that we make contact with that force and say 'this is the situation, who do we need to speak to? How can we make sure you've got the right information?' because they firstly need to know that they've got a victim of forced marriage in that area, they also need to know if there's a forced marriage protection order, obviously it would be on the Police National Computer, but we would need to share the circumstances of it. And also, they need to know where the risk comes from so if anything happens to that victim they know the where, they know the background, they know the context, they know the, the most likely suspects might be, and what to do. (White British female police officer)

Such an effort includes making the receiving police force aware of protection orders in place, sharing concerns about breaches of FMPOs, triggers identified as part of risk-assessment and individuals posing a threat to the victim.

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### 7.2.5 Use of Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs)

On the topic of prevention and protection via forced marriage protection orders (FMPOs), all participants speak in favour of using them as they reflect a more victim-centred approach to addressing forced marriage cases. The Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act of 2007 entails FMPO, a civil remedy acting as an injunctive relief to prevent a potential/ impending forced marriage from happening, rather than going via the route of criminal prosecution (Idriss, 2015). Even though forced marriage is a criminal offence in the UK, victim-survivors find it very difficult to incriminate their family members, which is perceived to bring further dishonour and shame to family (Hester et al., 2015: 12; Quek, 2013). The criminal route, in contrast to being victim-centred, tends to over-focus on obtaining a prosecution over protecting victim-survivors (Idriss, 2015). In recognition of the broader deterrent message criminal prosecutions send (Home Office, 2012; Siddiqui, 2014), similar sentiments concerning shame for involving the police coupled with mistrust of police are echoed by practitioners:

> They feel that they would bring more shame and dishonour on their families if they approached the police. They would fear repercussions if they went through the criminal route. All of the victims I have ever worked with, and who we currently work with, do not want to pursue the criminal route because they are frightened of repercussions from the direct family, but also from the wider community. I believe it is useful to generate awareness. To criminalise it means, you know, people who do pursue a criminal route, if there is a conviction, you know that does highlight that, we will not tolerate this as a crime. It is a crime, it is unlawful, and it validates it does validate a victim. So by being criminalised, it validates that it is wrong. But where it isn't helpful is that I don't feel it will improve people's trust in the criminal process, that it won't ruin remove people's fears of repercussions. (White British female refuge worker)

Even police officials maintain that it is rare for victim-survivors to choose the criminal route because it invites the possibility for a public investigation into the family. Furthermore, a lack of trust in police procedures relates to either police's inability to alleviate victim-survivors' concerns about bringing further shame due to police involvement; or being able to adequately help respond to their support and safety needs, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

> I think it's quite rare for victims to want to have a police investigation because what they're effectively asking the police to do is investigate their family, and that's just so difficult. It's such a hard thing to do to leave your family in the first place. No matter what your family are trying

to do to you, you have strong attachments and bonds, and it's such a big decision to leave your family and maybe not see them again to then prosecute your family and for people to end up in prison because of that. It's really difficult. I think the other thing as well is that a lot of victims don't necessarily understand what the police may or may not be able to do, they might not have much faith or trust in the police, and if we can make them safe and understand that that's our primary goal then they might be more likely to trust us and to tell us and support a prosecution later on. (White British female police officer)

From a policy perspective, there appears to be an emphasis on prosecution to send a strong deterrent message to perpetrators (Gill and Gould, 2019). However, policing tends to prioritise safeguarding victim-survivors over pursuing punishment through criminalisation (Idriss, 2015). A similar sentiment is echoed below:

So, that's where I think a lot of the police response is focused on [on safeguarding] and it's getting across that we're not here just to arrest people and to convict people. (White British male police officer)

Breaching an FMPO is a criminal offence leading to a maximum penalty of five years in prison (Noack-Lundberg, Gill, and Anitha, 2021). Merits of criminalising an FMPO breach include: the ability of police to make immediate arrests when breaches are made; victim-survivors or relevant third party can directly apply for an FMPO; there is scope for victim-survivors to reconcile with family; victim-survivors feel empowered knowing the potential prosecution a breach carries (Gill, 2011; Idriss, 2015; Walker, 2018). Civil remedy in the form of FMPOs is considered to be an effective tool by practitioners as it intervenes in tangible ways preferred by victim-survivors:

It's like saying, "look forced marriage is a criminal offence, this is a protection order….we want to use this as a tool for education. Don't go ahead with this forced marriage or this will happen". It is quite a nice thing to be able to say that there is something which will save the victim from being forced. It has a lot of power as well. The FMPO can say 'right parents, we need all the passports of these children given to a social worker. We need you to tell us every time you are about to travel abroad, you need to get consent'. (South Asian female police officer)

However, some demerits of using FMPOs are also noted. Any breaches to FMPOs are heard in public courts rather than family courts, making family matters more public (Idriss, 2015), and making victim-survivors' initial fears around invoking shame for going to the police or court real, as explained below:

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But if we've got an adult that has capacity to make the decision about the element of risk, they're saying 'I don't feel I can go to the court'. Remember you can go to court in an emergency and get an FMPO on your own but there's always a return date. So you're always going to have to be in that court room with your parents or your family members and that in itself, is quite intimidating. And it all links back to *izzat*, you're kind of almost tarnishing, as a victim, your reputation because you're saying no to the forced marriage, but you're also taking your parents to court and you're getting a court order. (South Asian female police officer)

This research highlights that police officers tend to be more enthusiastic about FMPOs, while those practitioners in voluntary and specialist organisations often express concerns. Practitioners from these organisations, in particular, question the effectiveness of FMPOs when the victim-survivor continue to live in the same household where the FMPO has been served (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). The following excerpt highlights the delicate situation of being in close quarters with individuals in the family against whom an FMPOs has been taken out, spotlighting the practicalities around FMPOs:

I have seen FMPOs being taken out and served on the family and the victim is still within the family and social care will say that if you agree to this, we won't take any further action but that is going to put your client at greater risk. It's almost like taking an injunction or a non-molestation order and saying to the perpetrator of DA that "oh by the way, you're staying in the property, but the victim has taken this (FMPO) out on you". You know it doesn't make sense. The training of FMPOs need to be done on a regular basis, it needs to be audited. It is now being proposed that FMPOs are going to be recorded when they are issued in court onto a system. And that system will allow the local policing unit to get a copy of the FMPO. Because sometimes, it goes to an inbox and someone is not checking it, so that Police Department doesn't even know. So, for example, if it was Leicester but if the order was issued in Birmingham, it's got to be one centralised database that will hold it and then you can issue it out to that local police force so that then they can go out and serve it on the family or get someone serving the family. But it's not just the serving of the order, it's also managing the breach. (South Asian female 'by and for' organisation staff member)

As noted above, procedures of serving and recording an FMPO further require collaborative working between courts and police to log that FMPO on a centralised system to allow a range of police forces involved to be promptly aware about the issuance of an FMPO and the next steps to take. Interestingly, the practitioner from the 'by and for' specialist organisation in this sample points to improvements that could be done to the response-side, along with presenting, at times, critical views of the police.

This can be seen as a counterbalance to the pockets of good practice identified in police responses, discussed in the above sections.

Existing legislation and procedural processes can benefit from knowing about circumstances in which FMPOs are breached, and hence developing an improved strategy to manage and respond to such breaches. One such context mentioned in the interviews related to religious marriages:

> "And also think about religious marriages. So, where they are not registering their religious marriage, but they are getting married religiously but they may not have a civil marriage. How does FMPO work in these situations?" (South Asian female 'by and for' organisation staff member)

Recent research into the effectiveness of FMPOs has highlighted a critical issue: religious marriage ceremonies, such as *'nikaah*-only' ceremonies, often violate original FMPOs despite not being legally equivalent to civil or legal marriages in the UK (Noack-Lundberg, Gill, and Anitha, 2021: 386; Bone, 2020). The concerns about these ceremonies not being legally registered (Uddin, 2018) are well-founded and the lack of legal recognition can obscure breaches of FMPOs. This creates complex challenges in identifying and addressing FMPO breaches, due to the differing legal statuses of religious marriages in the UK.

To improve responses and prevention work around forced marriage, it is essential to address these legal, procedural and administrative gaps. Strengthening the framework to recognise and address the nuances of religious marriages would ensure better protection for victim-survivors and more effective enforcement of FMPOs, a gap identified by 'by and for' specialist in this research.

## Contextualising these findings in relation to the process-based nature of forced marriages

There is an unlikely decline in the prevalence of forced marriage, despite the recent decrease in the number of cases reported to the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU). FMU statistics for 2023 indicate that there were 280 cases of forced marriage and 519 enquiries, which is 16% lower than in 2022 (Home Office and FCO, 2023). However, there is still a large number of victim-survivors who do not report, or whose cases are not accurately identified and recorded as forced marriage (Chantler et al., 2017). The findings from this chapter are relevant to aid better identification, recognition and recording of forced

marriage in the UK. This chapter highlighted the far and in-between good work being done by practitioners in relation to:

- going beyond definitional understanding of forced marriage;

- asking more probing question to understand the influence of 'honour' and related motivations to better assess existing and potential risks;

- using a similar probing approach to determine the differences between arranged and forced marriage;

- overcoming race anxiety by juxtaposing violence against women in minority cultures with that in majority cultures

This work offers insights into the largely less well understood processes of grooming and gendered socialisation that are omnipresent throughout victim-survivors' lifetime and links to the need for the practitioners to be attuned to victim-survivors' lifelong abuse and control in the context of forced marriage (Anitha, Gill and Noack-Lundberg, 2023). In particular, the 'forever' nature of risks experienced by victim-survivors needs to be integrated into practitioner understanding of forced marriage in order to facilitate the provision of better support. While practitioners in the study did not explicitly use the word "*process*" to allude to the process-based nature of forced marriage, they spoke about 'what happens before and after a forced marriage', which continuously forms a context of coercion, pressures, shame and punishment overlapping with gender and power imbalances within families:

> You know, they're leaving, usually, very large families. They're leaving everything they've ever known and a lot of guilt comes with that. And leading up to somebody leaving, they would tell us, when they do leave, that they've experienced a lot of coercive control prior to leaving. You know, to such an extent that they say, you know, 'if you leave this family, you'll be responsible for your mother, if she dies. You'll be responsible for this'. You know, you can't. You know, people pretending to be poorly to try and keep people trapped within the family. So coercive control is definitely an unnoticed experience of forced marriage. (White British female refuge worker)

This highlights an emerging recognition of the need to consider the lifelong and ongoing nature of forced marriage on victim-survivors when assessing risks and providing support. Such a perspective acknowledges that the repercussions of forced marriage, actual, historical or impending, extend far

beyond the immediate situation. It supports the findings from the 'before', 'during', and 'after' chapters in highlighting the ongoing coercion and control by the natal family, spouse or marital kin, or a combination of all, making it difficult for victim-survivors to escape and rebuild their lives. A process-based understanding instils a holistic and long-term approach that addresses not only the immediate safety and legal needs of victim-survivors but also their long-term recovery and healing. There is a need to solidify this thinking amongst practitioners to move away from event-specific conceptualisation of forced marriage centred on very specific and one-off 'warning signs' such as fixing a date for a marriage ceremony, flying to the family's home country for marriage, printing wedding invitations, activities around bridal clothes shopping (Chantler, Mirza and MacKenzie, 2023). The above quote points to how the same pressures forcing women into marriage continue to exist to prevent them from leaving those marriage, or to make them feel responsible for bringing perceived dishonour by leaving.

The staff member from the LGBTQI+ organisation particularly expressed process-based understandings of forced marriage by discussing the poignant case of Naz Mahmood, a British Muslim gay man who committed suicide because his parents disapproved of his sexuality (Manzoor, 2015). British South Asian men can face routine and extreme heteronormative regulation leading to a forced marriage, before or after their sexuality is discovered by family members (see Jaspal, 2014; 2020). The following excerpt cogently recognises the "21 years of pressures Naz faced to get married" denoting the coercion and pressures rife in the 'before' stage:

> The starting point of that conversation was because he was sick and tired of being told by his family "when are you going to get married", "why isn't he married yet". There was an immense pressure for him to get married, and the constant pressure, and he just couldn't, he couldn't take any more being asked about that. And at the age of 34, he'd ran out of excuses, you know he'd moved to London, he was a very successful much-loved doctor, he'd done everything he possibly could to please his parents in terms of profession, he moved away to try and escape the pressures they were putting on him. But every time he had to go to a family event 'when are you going to get married?' Most of our clients come to us because of this immense pressure to get married. And I think it's not just the act of marriage itself. It's the bit before which might take decades to actually get to. It might you know might last decades, He was 34. He knew at the age of 13 that his parents will want him to get married. So that's, so how many's that, so that's what 21 years. (White British LGBTQI+ charity staff member)

This account emphasises the importance of the initial stages of coercion for victim-survivors of forced marriage routinely facing pressures to marry. The practitioner recognises that LGBTQI+ clients report "immense pressures to marry" in their 'before' stage where they are being socialised into heteronormative norms around marriage and compulsory heterosexuality (Gangoli et al., 2011). This socialisation process creates dangerous and isolating contexts for individuals with intersecting identities of race, gender, and sexuality, highlighting the need for targeted support during this critical period.

## Summary

This chapter examined the responses victim-survivors receive from formal services when attempting to escape forced marriages. Many of them feel let down by social services during their childhood, highlighting the critical need to recognise the 'before' stage and the risks present before an actual forced marriage occurs. Social services often fail to understand family dynamics, and schools also miss key signs, partly due to their own constructed discourses on forced marriage influenced by wider social structures of race, gender, sexuality, and policy climates. This affects their intervention strategies, directly impacting young girls' complex needs. Victim-survivors' reflections contextualise that during their school years (almost 15-20 years ago), the policy context around forced marriage was still developing and not as robust as it is now (Anitha and Dhaliwal, 2019; Gill and Anitha, 2023). Additionally, there are concerning instances of inadequate support and signposting by medical practitioners from the same communities as the victim-survivors, echoing issues discussed in chapter 5. This underscores the influence of community regulation on formal support systems. Finally, while refuges provide physical safety, they sometimes perpetuate the view of racially minoritised women as 'passive victims' (Razack, 2004). Overall, victim-survivors express a desire for more effective support in navigating coercive family contexts before forced marriages, addressing domestic abuse within those marriages, and rebuilding their lives afterward.

After discussing victim-survivors' firsthand experiences with formal help-seeking, it is crucial to consider what an effective response should look like. This chapter also presents interview findings with practitioners from the police, specialist organisations, local councils, refuges, and charities supporting LGBTQ+ victims of HBA. Practitioners emphasise the importance of probing beyond forced marriage definitions to understand the influence of 'honour' and related motivations, better assess risks and

differentiate between arranged and forced marriages. They also address race anxiety by integrating violence against racially minoritised women into the broader conceptualisation of violence against women and children, and safeguarding practices. and acknowledge the limitations of FMPOs. In contrast to the significant gaps in support and safeguarding noted earlier, the second section highlighted instances of good practice among practitioners. This is likely due to active campaigning and prevention work on forced marriage (Gupta, 2015; Patel, 2019) since the time victim-survivors in the study sought help, as made clear in Table 5. These findings highlight the need for responses to forced marriage to incorporate its process-based understanding discussed in previous chapters. Practitioners must recognise the lifelong nature of risks faced by victim-survivors, before, during and after forced marriage, and account for the varying perpetrators and power structures involved to offer more effective support (Batsleer et al., 2002).

While this chapter presents a narrative of apparent improvement in practitioner responses—particularly through more empathetic engagement, use of probing questions and stronger multi-agency awareness—these developments must be read with care. The small number of practitioners interviewed, combined with their proximity to specialist organisations, may reflect examples of localised best practice rather than systemic change. Moreover, this relative progress is complicated when placed alongside enduring issues raised in the wider literature, including inconsistent safeguarding, cultural stereotyping and lack of funding for 'by and for' services (Gill and Anitha, 2023; Chantler et al., 2022). For instance, while practitioners in this study recognised the risk of forced marriage beyond religious or ethnic stereotypes, national reviews (HMICFRS, 2022; Imkaan, 2017) continue to show that many victims are failed by services ill-equipped to meet their needs. As such, what might be seen as progress in this chapter must be tempered by an understanding of broader institutional inertia, policy gaps and the continued marginalisation of racially minoritised women in statutory responses to forced marriage.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

## Introduction

The research aimed to illustrate the varying degrees of control that British South Asian women face before, during, and after a forced marriage. It sought to deepen the process-based understanding of forced marriage, as emphasised by Chantler and McCarry (2020), and to explore how power dynamics are specifically framed within the lifelong control experienced by British South Asian women, given their complex family structures and relationships.

Forced marriage is not just about the absence of consent but also encompasses situations where individuals feel they lack genuine choice regarding marriage decisions, fearing negative consequences. This research into British South Asian women's experiences of forced marriage highlighted how forced marriage is actually a process rather than a single event which changes women's lives. It addressed the overall dynamics of coercion and control in forced marriage and ongoing effects of this specific form of violence against racially minoritised women. This research drew upon biographical narrative interviews with six victim-survivors of forced marriage; and semi-structured interviews with six members from the wider British South Asian community, and seven practitioners supporting victim-survivors of forced marriage.

This thesis began by outlining the research context and the key questions it aimed to address. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on forced marriage in the UK, particularly within South Asian communities. It explored the links between HBA and forced marriages and analysed the concepts of 'honour' and shame that govern South Asian women's actions, along with the severe consequences for deviating from these norms (Sanghera, 2009). The chapter critiqued the binaries of consent and coercion, showing how power imbalances shape women's consent in forced marriages, and highlighted the blurred line between arranged and forced marriages (Gill and Anitha, 2009; Gangoli et al., 2011). It also examined feminist perspectives on British South Asian women's agency and critiqued the cultural framing that often depicts racially minoritised women as passive victims of an oppressive culture (Anitha and Gill, 2015). The chapter concluded with a discussion of formal responses to forced marriage in the UK, and how this research integrates concepts of coercive control and intersectionality to reveal the ongoing, pervasive, and multidimensional nature of control and abuse experienced by British South Asian women in forced marriages (Crenshaw, 1991; Stark, 2007).

Chapter 3 described the feminist epistemology underpinning this qualitative research (Collins, 2015), including its access, sampling, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and data analysis techniques. It also reflected on my insider-outsider positionality as a young unmarried South Asian female researcher and its impact on the research process. The biographical narrative approach provided deep insights into victim-survivors' experiences, highlighting the relentless control they faced, which shaped Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 7 presented findings from interviews with practitioners, focusing on their understanding of forced marriage and their approaches to supporting victim-survivors.

In this final chapter, I revisit the research questions and provide responses based on the findings. I then summarise my original contributions to knowledge, identify limitations of the research along with opportunities for future studies, makes some recommendations for practitioners.

## 8.1 Research Questions

This research set out to answer the following questions:

1.) What factors contribute to the coercive processes leading to forced marriages among British South Asian women, and how do these factors shape their pre-marital experiences?

2.) What is the nature of control experienced by women when they are in the forced marriage?

3.) How do women leave forced marriages, and how do they continue to experience control and coercion after leaving?

4.) How do practitioners perceive and address the issue of forced marriage, and what gaps/opportunities exist in their approaches to supporting victim-survivors?

The following sections address how I have answered each of these research questions.

## 8.1.1 Factors contributing to the coercive processes leading to forced marriages among British South Asian women

This research highlighted that forced marriage is not an isolated event but a process rooted in victim-survivors' childhoods marked by control, abuse, and neglect. Chapter 4 focused on the 'before' stage, showing how victim-survivors were socialised into rigid norms of 'honour' and shame, shaped by their gender, age, sexuality, and citizenship status. From a young age, victim-survivors experienced control through fear, shame and strict parental expectations. Their childhoods were dominated by micro-regulation of their freedom (Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly, and Klein, 2018), restricted behaviour, limited unsupervised time, and enforced servitude, all of which eroded their sense of self and autonomy. They were denied educational opportunities, forced into household chores, and forbidden from forming relationships, particularly with men.

Methodologically, the use of biographical narrative interviewing allowed for the tracing of how these coercive dynamics unfolded over time and across relationships. What emerged was a vivid account of how control in childhood—often normalised as care or protection—laid the foundation for later forms of familial and marital abuse. The 'good daughter' trope emerged as a powerful narrative device used to reward conformity and punish resistance. Marriage was introduced not as a choice, but as an inevitability or solution to perceived behavioural deviation (Gill and Hamed, 2016).

In contrast, the community sample showed differences in choice, consent, and parental support. Although similar gendered norms existed, the community sample enjoyed greater choice, with daughters' interests prioritised over parental desires, reducing the inevitability of forced marriage. Some parents even accommodated their daughters' unconventional wishes, such as interfaith relationships/marriages. This contrast illustrated how choice and parental support can mitigate the risk of forced marriage.

The 'before' stage also revealed how family members' negative remarks about girls' age, skin colour, and weight intensified pressure to marry. Additionally, it showed how parents used their daughters' British citizenship as a transactional tool to enhance their own status, leveraging it in forced marriage arrangements. While parents saw British citizenship as a source of power, for the victim-survivors, it became a tool of coercion and oppression. This chapter clearly demonstrated how these early experiences of control and conformity laid the groundwork for the coercive processes that lead to forced marriages.

## 8.1.2 Nature of control experienced by victim-survivors while in the forced marriage

Chapter 5 examined how British South Asian women's experiences of forced marriages involved multiple perpetrators and complex power structures rooted in 'honour', shame, marital norms, and migration processes. While prior research often frames the 'during' stage of forced marriage as involving mainly the husband or in-laws, this study demonstrated that control is multidirectional—flowing from husbands, in-laws, natal family members, and the wider community simultaneously. The 'web of control' framework developed in this thesis captured how these actors reinforced one another's authority and limited women's capacity to resist or exit their marriages.

During the marriage, victim-survivors experienced overlapping forms of abuse including isolation, financial exploitation, faith-based coercion, reproductive control, and sexual violence. In some cases, these tactics mirrored dominant forms of domestic abuse, such as financial deprivation or surveillance. However, the specific context of forced marriage gave these forms additional weight and complexity—particularly where multiple family members acted in concert to uphold the abuse or where abuse was justified through appeals to culture, honour, or religion.

Additionally, the wider community played a role in perpetuating forced marriages by dismissing women's accounts, blaming them for wanting to leave, and reinforcing their obligation to stay, further deepening their entrapment. This broader social surveillance sometimes extended the reach of familial control and made leaving the marriage even more fraught with reputational and relational consequences. Another key finding was the instrumentalisation of women's British citizenship, especially in transnational marriages. This extended Stark's (2007) coercive control framework by showing how women's legal status and economic potential became part of the abuse itself. For example, women were forced to work to fund spousal visas or pressured to remain in marriages that served broader familial migration goals. Rather than empowering women, citizenship was commodified—transforming them into tools for others' mobility and social capital.

This chapter's significance lies in its conceptualisation of the overlapping and ongoing control faced by women during forced marriages, involving multiple perpetrators at different times, which prolongs their entrapment. It extended and critiqued Stark's (2007) model of coercive control to highlight the intricate power dynamics in South Asian women's forced marriages (Mirza, 2017), emphasising the interconnected yet distinct forms of control exercised by multiple perpetrators.

### 8.1.3 Victim-survivors' leaving and experiencing control after leaving

Chapter 6 explored how victim-survivors navigated the complex process of leaving a forced marriage, balancing their safety, well-being, and autonomy against the forces of family 'honour', the stigma of divorce, and potential community ostracism. Leaving was a gradual, challenging process marked by shame, fear of disownment and the realisation that family support is often absent. The chapter highlighted the victim-survivors' agency in making the difficult decision to leave, despite having been denied autonomy and choice throughout their lives. Women left their marriages for various reasons: recognising their parents' condonement of the husband's sexual violence, prioritising their and their children's well-being, reclaiming their sense of self, or achieving financial independence.

The chapter also discussed the 'after' stage, which emphasised that leaving did not mean complete liberation. Natal families, ex-husbands, and the broader community continued to exert control, leaving victim-survivors vulnerable and isolated. Natal families punished women for seeking justice or divorce, often leading to disownment and further isolation. They also aligned with ex-husbands, invalidating the women's experiences and refusing support during legal battles.

Ex-husbands maintained psychological control by discrediting the women's narratives, accusing them of infidelity, and complicating legal processes, sometimes resorting to life-threatening violence to assert their dominance. The wider community exacerbated these challenges by stigmatising divorce, scrutinising the women's behaviour, and increasing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation by male community members. This continued lack of support and persistent control during the 'after' stage makes it difficult for women to rebuild their lives.

### 8.1.4 Understanding practitioner's perspectives around forced marriage

Chapter 7 examined how practitioners respond to cases of forced marriage and the factors that influence these responses across time and institutional contexts. It revealed that while significant gaps and institutional failures remain—particularly in earlier years when forced marriage lacked clear legal and policy framing—there are now emerging examples of improved awareness, reflexivity, and safeguarding among certain practitioners.

Practitioner responses varied widely depending on geography, training, and institutional culture. The chapter highlighted how 'race anxiety'—the fear of appearing racist or culturally insensitive—often led to inaction or inadequate safeguarding. However, some practitioners addressed this anxiety by reframing forced marriage as a child protection or safeguarding issue, using familiar logics of risk and

harm to override cultural hesitancy. This shift in framing helped practitioners move beyond stereotypical or racialised understandings and take more decisive action.

The research also drew attention to pockets of good practice, especially among those in racially diverse urban areas or within specialist 'by and for' services. These professionals demonstrated a deeper understanding of the intersections of gender, culture and control, and were more confident in responding to forced marriage cases. However, these cases remained isolated examples, not reflective of widespread systemic change. National reports and grey literature continue to point to institutional inconsistencies, underuse of legal tools like FMPOs, and the need for survivor-led, culturally competent models of intervention.

Chapter 7 ultimately argued that despite some promising shifts, the practitioner landscape remains uneven, shaped by organisational context, funding constraints, and broader societal discomfort with addressing abuse in racially minoritised communities. This thesis calls for a reframing of professional responses to forced marriage—away from reactive, culture-based models and towards a whole-life safeguarding approach grounded in coercive control, intersectionality, and survivor experience.

## 8.2 Original Contribution to Knowledge

Based on the research questions addressed above, this section delineates the original contributions of this research.

### 8.2.1 Lifelong Nature of Control: Before, During and After the Forced Marriage

This research makes a significant original contribution to the field by reconceptualising forced marriage not as a discrete event but as a process marked by lifelong and multidirectional control. Through its feminist, biographical, and life-course approach, it advances a granular understanding of how control operates at different stages—before, during, and after the marriage—and how it is sustained by multiple actors, including parents, marital kin, communities, and institutional structures. The process-based nature highlighted in this research reveals that the pressures and control exerted on South Asian women are not confined to the period of the marriage but extend throughout their lives, underscoring the enduring and cumulative nature of these experiences.

The stages of control—before, during, and after the forced marriage—were not uniform for all victim-survivors. The nature and intensity of control varied significantly, with some victim-survivors experiencing more severe control during the marriage due to the 'web of control' (see Chapter 5) while others face heightened control either before or after the forced marriage. Victim-survivors in this research found themselves at the intersection of various pressures, including 'honour', shame, conformity to family and marital norms, religion, community expectations, and global power asymmetries. These intersecting dimensions of control are deeply embedded within social structures related to gender, family, kinship, intergenerational power, citizenship status and culture. As a result, the control they experienced was multifaceted and deeply rooted in the overlapping systems of oppression. This research offered a nuanced understanding of the lifelong control experienced by British South Asian women in the context of forced marriage, enriching the discourse on abuse and control within South Asian communities.

By examining these stages holistically, the research underscored the processual nature of forced marriage, demonstrating that the stages of control—before, during, and after the marriage—are not isolated incidents but are interconnected, forming a pattern of ongoing abuse. This process-based approach to understanding forced marriage revealed that control was not limited to the act of the marriage itself but was part of a broader trajectory of abuse that spanned the victim-survivors' entire lives.

Control often began well before the forced marriage manifesting through strict gendered socialisation into the family narrative around 'honour' codes, lack of choice in important decisions of life including marriage, and normalisation of control. This 'before' stage set the groundwork for the subsequent phases of control, with victim-survivors often facing intense pressures to conform to family and community expectations. The nature of control typically intensified during the forced marriage where multiple sets of perpetrators further controlled victim-survivors, making it definitively difficult for them to leave these marriages. The 'during' stage encompassed multidimensional and multiplicative experiences of enduring a forced marriage highlighting the ongoing and cyclical nature of control and power. Planning to leave the forced marriage involved agentic meaning-making by women as they took incremental steps towards finally leaving. Even after leaving the forced marriage, victim-survivors continued to experience control in the form of punishment, disownment and continued invalidation by parents, ongoing threats and intimidation by ex-husbands and projection of stigma by the wider community towards women's stigmatised identity as a divorcee. Thus, the research emphasised that

the control experienced by victim-survivors did not end when they left the marriage but persisted, often in different forms, long after they had left.

This research significantly extended Stark's (2007) model of coercive control by applying it to the lives of British South Asian women and demonstrating how the control they experience is not confined to a single perpetrator or a specific timeframe but is instead a multidirectional and persistent context created by multiple perpetrators, including women's parents, husbands, and the broader community, at various stages of women's lives. This work contributed to and expanded Stark's framework by revealing the complex and intricate power dynamics that permeate the lives of British South Asian women in forced marriages. These dynamics were characterised by the continuous and overlapping nature of control, where different sets of perpetrators contributed to an environment that not only initiated but also sustained forced marriages over time. This research thus illuminated the lifelong nature of coercive control in the context of forced marriage, emphasising how this form of abuse transcends the immediate marital relationship and is deeply embedded in cultural, familial, and community structures. By doing so, it underscored the necessity of broadening the scope of coercive control to fully capture the lived realities of British South Asian women.

This thesis offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating the utility of biographical narrative interviewing to uncover layered forms of abuse, particularly where control is normalised, culturally sanctioned, or enacted by multiple parties over time. In centring the voices of racially minoritised women, this approach challenges both legalistic and event-based framings of forced marriage, foregrounding the complexity and endurance of control in ways that have significant implications for policy, practice, and future scholarship.

In sum, this research redefines the scope, structure and temporality of coercive control in the context of forced marriage. It offers a comprehensive framework—grounded in empirical depth and theoretical innovation—that moves the field towards a more intersectional, relational and survivor-informed understanding of forced marriage.

## 8.2.2 'Web of Control'

This thesis introduces the concept of the 'web of control' as an original and critical contribution to understanding the nature of coercion within forced marriages involving British South Asian women. This framework offers a substantial theoretical departure from individualised models of coercive

control by conceptualising control as simultaneously multidirectional, layered, and enacted by multiple perpetrators across time and space. This interconnected and multidimensional control directly impacted victim-survivors' agency, their perceptions of safety, and their ability to seek help.

In the context of forced marriage, the 'web of control' refers to the cumulative system of power relations in which victim-survivors are entrapped—not just by their intimate partners, but by a dense network of actors including natal family members, marital kin, broader communities and institutional systems such as migration processes. This model exposes how coercion is not isolated or episodic, but part of an ongoing and relational process where perpetrators reinforce each other's power, sustaining women's subordination.

This research noted that the overlapping layers of control often manifest through parents continuing their influence via the husbands—by enforcing gender and sexual norms ingrained in the institution of marriage—or husbands reciprocating this control through the women's parents, or both simultaneously. Additionally, other family members (both natal and marital), the broader community, and the global political context surrounding forced marriage further contributed to the cumulative sense of control that compelled victim-survivors to remain in the marriage. The 'web of control' was crucial to understand the exacerbated risks, lack of safety and increased pressures women faced during the forced marriage which made leaving these marriages very difficult. Even when these marriages became abusive and violent, victim-survivors were pressured to conform to the roles of 'honourable' wives and daughters, showing obedience to both husbands and parents, and were expected to 'make the marriage work' regardless of the persistent violence and abuse.

The concept of the 'web of control' revealed critical overlaps among various sources of influence: natal kin (including parents and extended family members), the marital household (comprising the husband and his family), the broader community (such as neighbors, family friends, and peers), and the global political economy that framed forced marriage as a transactional arrangement. These overlapping layers of control reinforced and normalised the patriarchal norms that defined racially minoritised women's roles and status within marriages. Control was not relinquished by parents after marriage; rather, it was extended and reinforced through the husband's authority within the marital household. This overlap of control is particularly significant, as it means that women remain subject to their parents' influence even after marriage, while husbands exploited the existing control and fear ingrained in the daughter-parent relationship. This finding deepens our understanding of forced marriage by demonstrating how these overlapping layers of control perpetuate women's subjugation, revealing the complex dynamics that sustain forced marriages and the pervasive nature of control

within them. The 'web of control' also reveals how British citizenship—commonly assumed to be a site of empowerment—is co-opted as a tool of oppression, commodified by both natal and marital kin to secure migration, elevate status or accrue financial benefit. Control is exercised not only through everyday micro-regulations of behaviour but also through structural and transnational arrangements, positioning women as passive conduits of capital and mobility rather than autonomous actors.

The 'web of control' model offered a significant advancement in the understanding of coercive control by illuminating the pervasive, multidimensional and multidirectional nature of control experienced by South Asian women in forced marriages. This model extended the traditional concept of coercive control by highlighting how control was not only ongoing but also deeply intertwined with factors such as gender, age, race, religion, women's relationships with their natal families, notions of 'honour' after the marriage, and relative ideas of safety. These intersecting dimensions shaped and intensified the mechanisms of control, making it nearly impossible for victim-survivors to escape these marriages.

This original contribution addressed a critical gap in the existing literature by focusing on the specific, often overlooked, experiences of South Asian women, thereby broadening the applicability of the coercive control model (Mirza, 2017). The 'web of control' highlighted how these overlapping factors created an all-encompassing environment of domination that not only entrapped women in forced marriages but also profoundly influenced their ability to exercise agency. By framing control through the lens of intersectionality, this model revealed the complex, layered structures of power that British South Asian women faced, making it a pivotal tool for understanding and addressing the unique challenges they encounter in forced marriages.

By foregrounding the 'web of control', this research provides a transformative lens to analyse forced marriage as a structural and social process rather than a discrete or culturally exceptional act. It offers a much-needed analytical tool for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to identify and respond to the full continuum of coercion that British South Asian women experience. This original framework is pivotal to moving beyond culturalist or legalistic approaches and towards a more expansive, intersectional and survivor-centred understanding of violence and abuse.

## 8.2.3 Transactional Nature of Forced Marriage

A key original contribution of this thesis is its exposure of the transactional nature of forced marriage, where British South Asian women's citizenship becomes a commodity within transnational family strategies. This research uncovers how women's passports were not sources of autonomy, but instruments used by both natal and marital families to broker migration, acquire financial capital, or elevate social status. Rather than disrupting gender hierarchies (Qureshi, Charsley, and Shaw, 2014), citizenship was routinely weaponised—reducing women to assets whose value lay in their ability to facilitate the migration of others.

This research extends and deepens analysis of the global political economy of forced marriage, showing how coercive control is scaffolded not only by familial actors but by cross-border systems of inequality. It builds on the work of Chantler et al. (2009) and Anitha et al. (2018), offering new insight into how control operates across borders, linking women's micro-level vulnerabilities to macro-level asymmetries in gender, class, race, and citizenship. Women were forced to sponsor husbands' visas, finance dowries, and relinquish financial independence—all while being framed as dishonourable or disobedient if they resisted.

The study demonstrated how women's passports were leveraged to perpetuate violence and abuse in unfamiliar global contexts, illuminating the transnational dynamics of control driven by the global political economy. The study found that victim-survivors were often abandoned by their natal families, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by their husbands, who treated them as part of a transactional arrangement, thus reinforcing the notion of women as expendable assets. In this research, victim-survivors were seen as assets, but without agency. Despite being undermined for their skin colour, weight, or 'attractiveness', they still held value—only in terms of what their families could gain from them. This research exposed how women's British citizenship is commodified, with their value being determined by the economic benefits their passports provided to their families. This analysis built upon Chantler et al. (2009), emphasising how global power asymmetries intersect with gender, economic status, kinship relations, and citizenship to sustain the control and abuse experienced by women in forced marriages. The findings revealed that the socioeconomic benefits associated with women's citizenship often take precedence over their welfare, exacerbating their multidirectional control and abuse within the marriage. It reframes forced marriage as a deeply embedded transnational system of control and exploitation, rooted in global hierarchies of mobility, patriarchy, and capital. By doing so, this thesis provides a powerful analytical framework for recognising how structural and familial agendas converge to produce sustained violence—violence that is legitimised through both intimate and institutional complicity.

## 8.3 Research Limitations

The findings of this research provided detailed insight into the process of forced marriage as experienced by British South Asian women. Before I consider the implications of these findings for future research, I acknowledge the limitations of this study. While this research is comprehensive and includes a range of participants, the following limitations should be acknowledged:

First, the study did not include migrant South Asian women or those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), who face unique challenges related to their immigration status. Additionally, the research did not capture the experiences of South Asian women from the LGBTQ+ community or those with learning disabilities. These groups have distinct and critical experiences related to forced marriage. Accessing these populations is notably challenging due to sensitive issues surrounding sexuality and domestic abuse, areas where research is still developing (see Jaspal, 2014; Clawson and Fyson, 2017). As an example, this research aimed to include male victims of forced marriage, however, this was hampered by significant challenges in access and participation (See 3.3.1). This could do with the dynamics of a male participant and female researcher, but emerging studies underscore persistent barriers in engaging male participants in forced marriage research (see Samad and Eades, 2002; Idriss, 2019).

Linked to the above, although the study highlighted the intersections of gender, race, age, marital status and citizenship in the context of forced marriage, it may not fully address all dimensions of intersectionality, such as the impact of class, disability, or LGBTQ+ identities. The research's focus on South Asian women, while crucial, may not encompass the full spectrum of experiences and challenges faced by individuals with different intersecting identities.

Thirdly, the research involved a small sample size. However, the use of a biographical narrative approach, with each participant interviewed twice, resulted in 12 narrative interviews. This methodological choice allowed for the collection of rich, detailed data that offers profound insights into the lived experiences of these individuals (Wengraf, 2011). While the small sample size may limit the generalisability of the findings, the depth and quality of the data provided a nuanced understanding of the complexities of forced marriage. This focused approach contributes valuable knowledge to the field, setting a foundation for future research with larger samples to build upon. The

detailed narratives of victim-survivors highlight critical themes and dynamics that can inform and guide further studies.

The research highlighted the gaps and opportunities in formal service responses to forced marriage but did not encompass all institutional perspectives. Recognising that this research does not include perspectives from legal professionals, policymakers and support staff at the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), for example. Future research could integrate these additional viewpoints to create a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues and potential improvements in policy and practice. A comprehensive analysis incorporating these perspectives would offer a deeper understanding of the systemic challenges and opportunities for enhancing support and intervention strategies.

These limitations highlight areas where the research could be expanded and improved. Future studies should aim to address these gaps, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of forced marriage.

## 8.4 Implications for Future Research

This research opens up several directions for future inquiry, particularly around the lifelong, multidirectional, and relational nature of control in the context of forced marriage. By adopting a feminist, biographical, life-course methodology, this thesis traced how control and coercion evolve before, during, and after forced marriage, offering insights that future research can build upon and expand.

While the study's small sample size necessarily limits generalisability, it provides a powerful framework for understanding the total coercive burden (Anitha and Gill, 2011) that racially minoritised British South Asian women navigate. Future research could test, expand or refine the 'web of control' concept by engaging larger, more diverse samples, including women from different South Asian backgrounds, faiths and immigration statuses.

There is significant scope for comparative research across ethnic, racial and geographic contexts, both within and beyond the UK, to explore how family, community and institutional control structures intersect and are shaped by broader transnational dynamics. Future studies should consider how class, caste, transnational kinship ties and patterns of migration influence the conditions under which forced

marriages occur and are sustained. This would enable the development of a more intersectional and globally attuned framework for understanding coercive control.

In particular, expanding the concept of the 'web of control'—introduced in this thesis—by incorporating a wider range of South Asian women's experiences could illuminate how multiple perpetrators, cultural norms, religious beliefs and socio-economic hierarchies interact to sustain control. Future research should investigate how these dynamics are experienced differently across generations, faiths and citizenship statuses. A broader empirical base would not only validate the framework but also refine our understanding of the relational and institutional mechanisms that make forced marriages persist. By diversifying both participant profiles and contextual settings, future research can identify more nuanced strategies for prevention, intervention and survivor-led support in a range of socio-cultural and legal landscapes.

Future studies should also center intergenerational dynamics, particularly the experiences of children growing up in the aftermath of forced marriage. What kinds of stigma, policing or honour-based pressures do they face? How do they interpret, reproduce or resist the control dynamics observed in their families? Attending to these questions would offer deeper insight into how 'webs of control' are sustained or disrupted across generations.

Future research into forced marriage should build on the insights from this study by examining how the distinct stages—before, during, and after the forced marriage—influence women's decisions about seeking help and leaving the marriage. Understanding the factors that lead to forced marriages and the mechanisms that perpetuate control can provide a clearer picture of how women make decisions about support and exit strategies. This approach could enhance our comprehension of their decision-making processes and inform more effective interventions and support systems.

Another important direction lies in bridging the gap between policy, practice, and lived experience. Research should explore how institutional, and practitioner responses evolve over time, and whether frameworks such as safeguarding, immigration checks or community engagement truly protect survivors—or risk entrenching surveillance, 'race anxiety' or non-intervention. There is a need for practitioners to be attuned to childhood contexts and victim-survivors' location based on their gender, age, sexuality, disability, immigration status and other vulnerabilities. There are times when victim-survivors do come in contact with practitioners in some forms in their 'before', 'during' or 'after' stage. Therefore, future research needs to integrate this lifelong perspective to better contextualise victim-survivors' childhood experiences of control, address the enduring consequences of forced marriage

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and the ongoing influence of 'honour' motivations, ultimately helping victim-survivors reclaim their autonomy and lead fulfilling lives.

Finally, more methodological innovation is needed. This thesis demonstrates the value of narrative life-course interviewing; future studies could expand on this by using participatory or survivor-led research methods that allow victim-survivors to co-produce knowledge, challenge dominant discourses, and shape how policy and service provision are evaluated.

## 8.5 Recommendations for Practitioners

This research adds to the knowledge of cumulative and lifelong nature of control experienced by British South Asian women in the context of forced marriage. The following recommendations are made for practitioners:

1.) **Develop Whole-Life Intervention Models**: Recognise that forced marriage is not a one-time event but often occurs within a continuum of control. Services should follow through post-separation to address ongoing risks from ex-husbands and families, and support women with housing, stigma, and parenting in the aftermath.

2.) **Map the Full Spectrum of Control**: Service providers must expand their understanding of coercive control beyond intimate partner violence to include abuse by parents, in-laws, siblings, and the wider community. Risk assessments and care plans should identify multiple perpetrators and account for lifelong patterns of control rather than focusing solely on crisis points.

3.) **Support Victim-Survivors Lacking Natal Family Support**: Many women who plan to leave forced marriages do so without family backing. Services should develop alternative safety planning strategies for those without familial protection, including safe housing, emergency financial support, and culturally sensitive emotional care.

4.) **Ensure Continuity of Support Post-Marriage**: Forced marriage is not a one-time event. Practitioners must adopt a whole-life perspective, offering ongoing support even after the marriage ends, especially when women face continued coercion from ex-partners, in-laws, or communities.

5.) **Expand Cultural Competence to Non-Urban Areas**: Many participants in this study found better support in urban, diverse settings. Training and resources should be extended to rural

and predominantly white areas, where professionals may be less familiar with coercive cultural dynamics in the context of violence against racially minoritised women.

6.) **Embed Local Community Partnerships**: Foster partnerships with 'by and for' organisations, not just for referrals but for co-developing outreach and culturally appropriate interventions.

7.) **Create Multi-Agency Reflective Forums**: Establish safe spaces for inter-professional learning on race, coercion and family dynamics—focusing on gaps in awareness and routes to accountability. Multi-agency training must emphasise lifelong patterns of control, not just crisis-stage interventions, and explicitly tackle coercion in childhood and post-marital stages.

8.) **Improve Financial and Immigration Safeguards:** Practitioners working in immigration and financial sectors should receive targeted training on how coercive control and financial abuse can manifest in forced marriage contexts. This includes recognising red flags in sponsorship arrangements and cross-border financial transactions. Such training would support early intervention and strengthen multi-agency safeguarding responses.

## Final Words

This research has redefined how we understand forced marriage by offering a bold, process-oriented analysis of the lifelong and multidirectional control experienced by British South Asian women. By examining the stages of 'before', 'during', and 'after' the forced marriage, this thesis revealed that coercion and abuse are not confined to the marriage itself but deeply embedded across the victim-survivors' life course. It challenged dominant framings of forced marriage as a singular event, instead presenting it as a continuum of violence shaped by interlocking structures of family, community and global politics.

By extending Stark's (2007) model of coercive control and introducing the concept of the 'web of control', this study illuminated how control is exercised not just by one intimate partner, but by multiple actors—including parents, in-laws, and community members—across intersecting domains of 'honour', shame, gender, faith, age and citizenship. Through a feminist, biographical narrative methodology, the research placed women's lived experiences at the centre, showing how violence is often justified, normalised and made invisible within culturally sanctioned expectations.

This thesis does not merely contribute to academic knowledge—it demands change. It speaks directly to the urgent need for more nuanced, culturally responsive and structurally informed interventions in

policy and practice. It urges policymakers to move towards frameworks that genuinely recognise the complexity and persistence of coercive control in racially minoritised women's lives. Ultimately, this research lays the groundwork for future scholarship and feminist action committed to dismantling the systemic conditions that sustain forced marriage—and reimagining a world where women's autonomy is no longer contingent on silence or survival.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Profile of Victim-Survivors

**Aliyah**

*British Bangladeshi*

Aliyah was a bright and ambitious student from a young age. Encouraged by her father to pursue higher education, her life took a challenging turn when she revealed that she liked a boy at university. This led to a strained relationship with her father, who eventually pressured her into an arranged marriage. Soon after, Aliyah faced severe domestic abuse, sexual violence, and coercive control from her husband and in-laws. Although she sought refuge with her parents during the worst times, they urged her to remain in the marriage. Despite the continued abuse, she finally decided to leave with her young son. Returning to her unsupportive parents, she eventually found safety in a refuge, secured housing, and initiated divorce proceedings. After a prolonged battle due to her husband's manipulations, Aliyah successfully divorced and gained full custody of her child, embarking on a new chapter in her life.

**Sharmin**

*British Bangladeshi*

Sharmin's life has been marked by a series of traumatic experiences and resilience. Growing up, she witnessed her father's abusive and controlling behavior, which deeply affected her. At 18, during a school holiday, Sharmin was taken to Bangladesh, unaware that her father planned to marry her off. Once there, she was forced into marriage with a man twice her age, who sought to use the union as a means to enter the UK. Upon returning to the UK, she discovered she was pregnant. Sharmin, yearning for freedom, decided to divorce her husband but was nearly strangled by her father when she revealed her intentions. She escaped to a refuge and began rebuilding her life, even attending university. However, she fell into another abusive relationship, leading to a second forced marriage and two children. After facing escalating dangers, Sharmin finally escaped to a refuge.

**Mehreen**

*British Pakistani*

As a toddler, Mehreen was left in the care of her uncle and aunt in the UK while her parents were in Pakistan. During this time, she endured degradation and domestic servitude at their hands. She formed an online relationship with a boy in Pakistan. When she shared this with her uncle and aunt, they pretended to support the match. However, they tricked her into traveling to Pakistan, claiming they would proceed with her desired marriage. Once there, Mehreen was told she could not marry the boy she loved and was instead told that she would be marrying her cousin. Her passport was confiscated, trapping her in a dire situation. Mehreen contacted the Home Office and managed to escape the forced marriage in Pakistan. After returning to the UK, she pressed criminal charges against her uncle for his role in forcing her into marriage, reclaiming control of her life.

**Ghazala**

*British Pakistani*

Ghazala's life was shaped by the weight of family expectations and cultural obligations from a young age. As a child, she was engaged to a man twice her age, a match arranged by her mother to maintain ties with her family in Pakistan, despite her father's reservations. During a childhood trip to Pakistan, Ghazala met her future husband briefly and immediately disliked him. When she expressed her reluctance to her mother, she was told that the marriage was non-negotiable due to promises made to the family. At 18, Ghazala was forced into the marriage, which ended her education and led to her being isolated by her husband through coercive control. Trapped and cut off from the world, she endured this life for a long time. She finally left after seeking her parents' approval to leave the marriage.

**Roop**

*British Indian*

Roop's life was shaped by her mother's expectations and her inability to say no to her. Despite having aspirations to study and work, Roop was forced into a marriage with a man from India. Her mother, eager to see her married, disregarded Roop's desires. After the marriage, Roop endured severe domestic abuse, sexual violence, and coercive control from her husband. She strongly believed that he

married her solely for a British passport. Throughout this ordeal, Roop received no support from her mother, who insisted that she should remain a good wife and make the marriage work. However, Roop's determination to reclaim her life led her to become financially independent. With newfound strength, she eventually left the abusive marriage. Today, Roop is in a healthy, loving marriage and has built a beautiful life with her children.

**Harnoor**

*British Indian*

Harnoor was raised to be subservient and obedient, groomed from a young age for her future role as a wife. She learned to cook and clean, fulfilling the expectations placed upon her. During her childhood, Harnoor was taken to India under the guise of a holiday, only to be engaged to a man from her native village. At 18, she was forced into marriage with this man, but it quickly became clear to her that this was not the life she wanted. After enduring a night of sexual abuse, Harnoor made the courageous decision to leave the marriage. This act of defiance led to her being disowned by her mother, who refused to speak to her for years. Despite the rejection and challenges, Harnoor's strength allowed her to break free from the life that had been imposed on her.

# Appendix 2: Emails to practitioners/ domestic abuse organisations



**Request** for interview- forced marriage doctoral **research**

I hope my mail finds you well and that you have had a restful holiday break.

I am getting in touch regarding my doctoral **research** and wondered if you would like to participate in a virtual interview to discuss your experience and insights on forced marriage cases you have come across.

This interview will be one-on-one, approximately one hour long and over Teams preferably. Kindly find enclosed herewith an information sheet which outlines the aims and objectives of my **research**. If you are still interested, I would greatly appreciate if you could respond with a suitable date and time for the interview. Additionally, there is a consent form at the end of this attachment, which I would **request** you to sign and send it to me. I must let you know that I am teaching at the university on 25th and 26th January, so those dates are slightly tied up.

On a side note, it would really help me out if you could recommend more people I could potentially interview- from survivors of forced marriage and honour-based abuse (both men and women) to more practitioners.

Thank you and best wishes,
Ayurshi

**Ayurshi Dutt**
Doctoral **Research**er | ayurshi.dutt@durham.ac.uk | +44 (0)191 33 43004 | @AyurshiD

I hope my mail finds you well and that you have had a restful holiday break.

I am getting in touch regarding my doctoral **research** and wondered if you would like to participate in a virtual interview to discuss your experience and insights of forced marriage cases you have come across.
As mentioned earlier, this interview will be one-on-one, approximately one hour long and over Teams preferably. Kindly find enclosed herewith an information sheet which outlines the aims and objectives of my **research**. If you are still interested, I would greatly appreciate if you could respond with a suitable date and time for the interview. Additionally, there is a consent form at the end of this attachment, which I would **request** you to sign and send it to me. I must let you know that I am teaching at the university on 25th and 26th January, so those dates are slightly tied up.

Thank you and best wishes,
Ayurshi

**Ayurshi Dutt**
Doctoral **Research**er | ayurshi.dutt@durham.ac.uk | +44 (0)191 33 43004 | .@AyurshiD
Department of Sociology, Durham University | 32 Old Elvet, Durham, DH1 3HN, UK

Thank you for speaking over the phone with me earlier today, Zahra.

My name is Ayurshi and I am a doctoral student at the Department of Sociology at Durham University. My **research** focuses on forced marriage and the influence of family honour at different stages of a forced marriage (before, during and after). As part of this **research**, I am conducting virtual interviews with service providers and practitioners, focusing on their experiences of providing safeguarding support to forced marriage survivors and playing a key role in organising women's resistance and agency. With this in mind, I would like to interview frontline staff and practitioners at your organization about their insights to forced marriage cases handled by Ashiana.

This **research** is fully approved by the Durham University Ethics Committee Board and follows the British Sociological Association **research** codes and will ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Apart from being a **research**er, I also have a background in domestic abuse prevention in the Indian context. If successful in collecting adequate information and data, this **research** can significantly fill practical and theoretical gaps- by signposting clear use of honour as a coercion tactic- thus also proving to be beneficial to key agents.  Kindly find enclosed herewith an information sheet which outlines the aims and objectives of my **research**.

Thank you for taking the time to read my email, and I look forward to hearing from you regarding the chances for arranging an interview. I would also be grateful if Ashiana would be willing to help me with recruitment of participants who have been survivors of forced marriage or honour-based abuse. I have had a few (not many) survivors reach out to me to participate but I also seek to have a dynamic range of survivors recruited through your organization. Rest assured, anonymity will be maintained, and final decision will be respected.

Thanks in anticipation.

Warm wishes,
Ayurshi

**Ayurshi Dutt**
Doctoral **Research**er | ayurshi.dutt@durham.ac.uk | +44 (0)191 33 43004 | .@AyurshiD
Department of Sociology, Durham University | 32 Old Elvet, Durham, DH1 3HN, UK
Durham Centre for **Research** into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA) | www.durham.ac.uk/criva | @CRiVADurham

# Appendix 3: Tweets

**Ayurshi Dutt**
1,267 posts

**Ayurshi Dutt** @AyurshiD · Feb 22, 2021
Call for participants: I am actively arranging virtual interviews with survivors of forced marriage (men and women) from South Asian communities (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) in the UK. Any leads/RTs would be helpful. @CRiVADurham @HARMnetwork @Hopetraining @IKWRO @Imkaan

6        59        39

**Hera Hussain** @herahussain · Feb 23, 2021
Hi Ayrushi – could you tell me more about the research? We can amplify from @ChaynHQ.

1        2

**Ayurshi Dutt** @AyurshiD · Feb 25, 2021
DM'd you:)

You reposted

**dr. rosie 🌈 bellini is on the academic job m** @Rosie_Bel · Feb 23, 2021
Chance to take part in some really important work 👇

**Ayurshi Dutt** @AyurshiD · Feb 22, 2021
Call for participants: I am actively arranging virtual interviews with survivors of forced marriage (men and women) from South Asian communities (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) in the UK. Any leads/RTs would be helpful. @CRiVADurham @HARMnetwork @Hopetraining @IKWRO @Imkaan

3        3

**Ayurshi Dutt**
1,267 posts

**Ayurshi Dutt** @AyurshiD · Feb 22, 2021
Call for participants: I am actively arranging virtual interviews with survivors of forced marriage (men and women) from South Asian communities (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) in the UK. Any leads/RTs would be helpful. @CRiVADurham @HARMnetwork @Hopetraining @IKWRO @Imkaan

3        3

**Breaking the Silence** 🔒 @btsmenrc · Feb 23, 2021
Yes we can help

1        3

**Ayurshi Dutt** @AyurshiD · Feb 23, 2021
DM'd you:)

1

You reposted

**Phoebe/Φοίβη🌈** @pcoles123 · Feb 22, 2021
If anyone can assist with @AyurshiD's important research, please contact her!

**Ayurshi Dutt** @AyurshiD · Feb 22, 2021
Call for participants: I am actively arranging virtual interviews with survivors of forced marriage (men and women) from South Asian communities (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) in the UK. Any leads/RTs would be helpful. @CRiVADurham @HARMnetwork @Hopetraining @IKWRO @Imkaan

## Appendix 4: Email communication for Recruitment

I am also writing to inform you that I have now attained a formal green-light from my university to do my interviews. Please find attached with this mail an information sheet of how ethics and confidentiality will be maintained, the background of the <mark>research</mark> and details about how the information from your interview will be utilized.

If this suits you, please could you share your preferred date and time for our first interview. The format of the interview encompasses that I conduct two narrative interviews- owing to the sensitivity of the topic. After our first interview, we can take some time off before meeting for the second interview, simply to space the interviews out.

If there is anything you would like to discuss, please feel free to mail and we can also have a quick chat about it. Given the business of this month, I would totally understand if we schedule an interview in the new year:) I am also scheduled to travel from 24th December o 8th January, so it would be best to arrange a video interview after this, or if you would prefer a face-to-face interview, in early February (after my self-isolation period is complete).

To make communication easy, I am happy to share my mobile number if you wish to discuss something over the phone. It is +94487899843.807894rt

Speak soon:)

Warmly
Ayurshi

# Appendix 5: Biographical Narrative Interview Rough Guide

**First session**

Encourage free narrative. Starting script.

*I'm collecting biographical data for a research study about the role of family honour in coercing a marriage or consenting to a marriage.*

*You have agreed to share your experiences and I want to hear these from your own individual perspective.*

*Please could you tell me your experience of being forced into marriage. You can start from anywhere you wish to begin. Please take your time. We've got as much time as you need for this and start from wherever you like- it does not have to be in chronological order, simply what you want to draw out.*

*I'll listen first, I won't interrupt you and I may take a few notes that I'll ask you questions about later.*

*We have agreed I can also record the session so that I can transcribe it later and it will help me prepare for our next session to build on the themes that are important to you.*

*So can you tell me your story, the events and experiences that have been important to you up till now.*

Pick up on narrative points emerging from this interview so any questions asked will be framed around this. In addition, may draw out by using possible prompts framed around who, what, when, where and why/how questions:

- What was important for your family or people you lived with?
- What did you think was non-negotiable or expected or unexpected of you when it came to your marriage?
- At what time did you think your actions or responses for the marriage offer, proposal or arrangement mattered or did not mattered?
- How did you make sense of the situation? (Prompts- what were you told/what did you tell yourself to make sense of the situation? )
- Who was most involved in getting you married?
- Would you say you understood why they wanted you to get married?
- How did you distinguish between persuasion and coercion? When did you make sense that things were getting unbearable or out of control?
- How was the behaviour of your partner after marriage?
- What were your first thoughts when you thought of telling others about your situation or when your partner (or partner's family) became hostile?
- Did telling others make a difference?

- Who or what posed as a challenge for you to seek formal help and/or make sense of the situations?
- Did you think you and your needs were properly taken care of once you sought formal support?

**Second session**

In the second session, I would pick up on main narrative points from the previous interviews and then discuss about their current sense of selfhood.

- Challenges while living away from people who caused you harm.
- Hopes for future/concerns for future
- Optimism/pessimism
- Would you go back and change anything?
- Who needs to work most in effectively dealing with such instances of forced marriage?
- Do you think there is 'a particular kind of' focus when forced marriage is commonly discussed?
- What would you like to draw people's attention to?
- What specific needs of survivors should be promptly taken care of?
- How do you think other people should understand the issue of forced marriage? Who do you think needs to understand it the most?

**Prompts** (not all of these will necessarily be used but can be used as prompts to help develop the conversation over the course of the two interviews)

- Childhood
- Actual event or threat of forced marriage
- What were the situation of other siblings in the family?
- How/when did you know you were being asked to do something you did not wish?
- Did you feel there was ever a choice?
- Did you feel you were being forced into marriage for a specific reason?
- How did you make sense of the expectations attached?
- Did you think it was something to do with honour?
- What reactions did you get from your family or those around you when you tried to say no?
- Sponsoring your spouse or coming into the UK
- Attitudes and behaviour of spouse, their family or your family after the marriage
- What has been the effect on your life and other relationships over time?
- What support was available? Did you find it appropriate and helpful?
- What new skills/expertise have you had to develop?
- What do good times look like? what are the more challenging times? What do you enjoy, what frustrates you?
- What are other people's attitudes towards you? ( professionals, other members of South Asian community either in the UK or in your home country, families, the public)
- The future - What are your hopes and fears?

- What would have been the ideal scenario for you and for your family
- What services were available to you, how did you find out about them and then how easy were these to access?
- What information was available to you about future issues.
- Forced Marriage Civil and Criminal Acts- how effective do you think they are
- Acclimatising
- What have proved to be the main support networks available to you?
- Which services/supports are most and least effective?
- What would you like to see happen for your child (If there is a child)?

Note: some of these questions will be modified based on the participants' marital status.

- **Group 1: Experience of/Expectations from marriage**

1.) What does marriage mean to you? Are you married? Can you tell me about how you got married? (*if the participant is married*)
2.) What does marriage mean to you? How do you see yourself getting married? (*if the participant is single/unmarried*)
3.) In your family, when was the first time marriage was talked about in relation to you?
   Prompts:
   i.) How was the topic brought up? (who brought it up; how were you told about marriage in childhood; how did you get proposals later in life)
   ii.) Was it talked about as an arranged marriage set up or something else?
   iii.) How did they respond to it? Did your initial response change later? (*If the participant is single, then 'how do you intend to respond to such proposals'?*)
4.) Can you tell me what is considered an ideal or suitable marriage by you or your family?
   Prompts:
   i.) Notice if there are differences in the individuals understanding and family's
   ii.) What happens when your idea of marriage does not match with the ideal way of getting married?
   iii.) What are the acceptable/permitted ways of getting married?
   iv.) What is unacceptable?
   v.) What might happen if people still follow the unacceptable way?
   vi.) What do you think of people who marry in an unsuitable way?
5.) What are some of the things which are hoped from men and women when it comes to marriages?

- **Group 2: Family dynamics: honour, consent and community**

1.) What is honour or *izzat* according to you?
   Prompts:
   i.) How do you think its value is increased or decreased?
   ii.) How were you introduced to the idea of honour/izzat?
   iii.) Did you become conscious of it as time passed or were you reminded of it/made to be mindful about it?
   iv.) What did this mean to you? How did this effect your life's decisions?
   v.) Who do you think is often concerned about honour and why?

2.) Honour and consent
Prompts:
i.) Did you think about honour while you were deciding to say yes or no to a marriage proposal or your own marriage? (change tense depending on the participant's martial status)
ii.) Did anyone ever tell you about the consequences of 'crossing a line' when it comes to honour or izzat? (ways of threatening and control)
iii.) How do/would you take that into consideration or respond to that? (what is wrong or right with it? Do you find it justified? How does it make you feel?)

3.) Do you think it is generally easy to say no to marriage offers?
Prompts:
i.) How important were your grandparents or parents? In your family, who played the primary role in making decisions?
ii.) How do you think someone who does not wish to agree to the marriage would get their message across? Did you ever feel like you had to do this to tell your family about your disagreement to a marriage/offer?
iii.) What made you say yes?
iv.) If yes, how did you manage to eventually say no? What happened later?
v.) Do you think it is easier for other members in your family to easily say no to marriage? Who are these family members and why do you think it is easier for them?
vi.) Who else from your family got married in a similar way as you?

4.) Do you think some community or societal aspects play a role in whether to say yes or no to a marriage? Prompts: family, money, class, caste, religion, culture, controlling relationships
5.) Do you think there are some political or external factors which people have to think of while saying yes or no to a marriage? Prompt: perception of South Asian marriages in UK, racism, Islamophobia
6.) How do you, your family and your community define arranged marriages? Prompts: notice similarities and differences
7.) How do you, your family and your community define love marriages? Love marriages and arranged marriages? Prompts: notice similarities and differences; common views about love marriages; contrasting views to arranged marriages

- **Group 3: Forced Marriage**

  1.) How would you define forced marriages?
  2.) Are you aware about it in your wider community? Any local or recent case you remember?
  3.) Has this ever been talked about in your family? How?

4.) Are you or were you ever aware of someone being forced into a marriage? Could you please talk about this a bit?

5.) In the recent years, we have heard about some violent cases of forced marriage like Banaz Mahmood and Shafilea Ahmed? Have you heard of similar incidents in your wider community?

    i.)      Or have you heard some other instances which are not exactly like Banaz or Shafilea? Could you talk about these for a bit please?

    ii.)     Do you think these are an accurate representation? Prompts: soft pressures, representation of BAME communities in UK

    iii.)    Or would you say that subtle forms of pressure are also influential in a forced marriage? Could you describe this in detail?

6.) How can people who are in these situations seek help? Prompts: what do they know about sources of help, barriers to seeking help, are currently available sources of help effective?

7.) Do you think apart from help, there is something else needed which supports such people? Prompts: overall problems- community, government responses, family mentality/traditions.

8.) Any other comments?

9.) How was your experience today?

## Appendix 7: Practitioner Interview Guide

**About the practitioner**

1.) What is your job title and the organization you work for? (upon establishing that they are okay with this information being written)
2.) Can you tell me how you have come to be in your current role in this organization? (Prompt: job history; experience they have got)

**About the organization (remit, key partner agencies, referral system)**

3.) Can you describe what your organization does? (Prompts: main service users, agencies)
4.) Do you in your role receive disclosures of forced marriage?
5.) How many disclosures of forced marriage do you receive on a monthly/yearly basis?
6.) Are these self-referrals or referrals from other agencies?
7.) Who are the main agencies that your organization works with? (Prompt: locally in the community as well as more broadly)
8.) Could you describe a typical service user's journey from start to end after they contact you or your organization? (Prompt: how do they get to you/ how do they receive disclosures; are they referred from one organization to another until finally they reach you; how they register and follow-up cases)

**Interviewee/Organizations' conceptual understanding w.r.t. forced marriages and 'honour'-based violence**

9.) What do you or your organization understand by the term forced marriages? (Prompt: how do they see 'consent', 'free will', coercion and agency)
10.) How do you or your organization identify a victim of forced marriage?
11.) How do you or your organization define honour or *izzat*? Does this differ from the definition your partner agencies use? How, in what ways?
12.) How is criminalization of forced marriage and use of Forced Marriage Civil Protection Orders and other legal provisions perceived by you or your organization? (Prompts: their knowledge and thoughts- what do they think about the usefulness (or not) of the law)

**Interviewee/Organization's understanding of nuances/subtleties w.r.t. forced marriage**

13.) It has been seen that more fatal cases of forced marriage like that of Banaz Mahmood and Shafilea Ahmed are regularly mentioned in the public domain. Could you please tell me if your case load too reflects instances like these?

14.) How do you associate force and coercion when dealing with not so extreme cases of forced marriage? Could you give some case examples from your professional experience?

15.) Do you think less 'forceful' experiences of forced marriages often go unnoticed and unchallenged? (prompt: if they make connections with the more popular and extreme cases/instances)

16.) In the past, courts have given judgements where pressure exerted by parents holds legitimate significance and hence valid. A statement from one such ruling by a judge is: *"In my opinion parents, and indeed others, are well entitled to exert their influence, and indeed to apply pressure, upon a person who is refusing to marry, with a view to producing a change of mind".* Could you comment on the authority and power of parents to force children into marriage?

**Barriers and Facilitators**

17.) In your experience, what challenges are faced by those disclosing forced marriage?

18.) Do victims express concerns related to honour or izzat when they come up to you? What are these concerns? (prompts: family name, family pressure, parent's respect, police involvement, visits made by social services)

19.) How do you respond to or deal with these concerns of victims? (Prompt: how to they ensure they support or provide suitable advice)

20.) What do you think is missing in supporting victims of forced marriage or honour-based violence? (prompts: right time for intervention, cultural sensitivity or ignorance, racism, one-chance rule)

21.) What more can be done to provide overall support to victims after they disclose their experience?

22.) How was your experience today?

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title of study:** <u>Exploring women's experiences of abuse and control in the context of forced marriage within British South Asian communities</u>

You are being invited to take part in some research. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why I am conducting the research and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully.

**What is the purpose of the research?**

I am conducting this research to explore how survivors of forced marriage experience and interact with the notion of family honour or *izzat* during the process of forced marriage- i.e. before, during and after the forced marriage. This research intends to make sense of how honour influences individuals' marital decision-making. Additionally, this research will develop an understanding of survivors' agency and how they negotiate, challenge or succumb to a forced marriage. As this is a relatively under-researched topic, this research can signpost how multiple other forms of violence, abuse and control co-occur alongside a forced marriage, thus also proving to be beneficial to gender-based violence practitioners.

**Who is carrying out the research?**

I am Ayurshi Dutt, a Doctoral Researcher at Durham University. I also have a professional background of working as a frontline support staff in gender-based violence sector in India and Nepal. I have also briefly worked with UNICEF India. I am originally from India and speak Hindi and Urdu fluently. So, if you wish, we can also partially conduct the interview in these languages. I hope to provide a safe and comfortable interview environment to you so that your voice, views and experiences are well understood and reflected in my research.

**Why have I been chosen?**

I want to invite individuals who have experienced forced marriage in any form and at any stage of their life to participate either in their home or other safe space by describing their circumstances before and after the marriage and their experience of seeking support in any form, if they did so.

I am asking you to participate because you are at least or above 18 years of age, have lived experience of forced marriage and belong to Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi community.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, it is completely up to you whether you take part or not. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form to say that you are happy to participate in the research. However, you can still change your mind and stop participating (also known as 'withdrawing'). If you decide to participate, but later wish to withdraw from the study, then you are free to withdraw any time up to October 2021, without giving a reason and without penalty.

**What do I have to do?**

You will participate in two one-on-one interviews known as biographical narrative interviews where you talk about your experiences of being forced into a marriage or circumstances leading up to an unwanted marriage, pressure to get married, escaping this situation, discord or abuse after marriage, seeking any form of help and how you felt while seeking help.

I will strictly follow government's health and safety guidelines on Covid-19 and conduct social-distanced interviews at a place you feel comfortable at. This can be your home too, or any other place you feel safe and peaceful at. I am open to conducting online interviews too only if you are on board with this. I understand you can feel reticent if you share a house with other people (family members), or might not have access to stable internet connection. For these reasons, I emphasize on conducting socially distanced face-to-face interviews with you.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Our sessions will be recorded if you agree. I will take handwritten notes if you express your discomfort with audio recordings. The audio recordings are made to make it easier for me to remember and record your views/experiences. They will be transcribed and then the original recording will be deleted. The interview transcript will be analysed and excerpts from your interview might be used in written reports/publications and verbally presented material in conferences/workshops/the classroom. Your raw data will only be viewed by the researcher and her two supervisors (both women). The data collected will be anonymized.

Any data collected, in both written and digital formats, will be securely stored in either a locked cabinet or in Durham University cloud and password protected desktop- all of which only the researcher will have access to. The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as the transcriptions have been done and checked. Only the researcher will have access to the original recordings. The transcriptions will be destroyed no later than 10 years after the conclusion of this project. I will not

hold your personal data once right to withdraw expires (October 2021) as it will be analysed within a wider, anonymised, data set.

According to data protection legislation, and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)).

For further information about the University's data protection and retention policy please see: www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/consent/privacynotice/

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Sometimes, reflecting on our own lives can be upsetting or distressing. You can take time out whenever you wish. You do not have to answer every question in our discussions; you have the right to say no to questions if you do not wish to answer them. If you prefer to do online interviews, it may not necessarily be possible that you are able to isolate yourself for two hours at a stretch in a room if you live with other people or family members, thus affecting confidentiality of data. Secondly, in an online interview scenario, it is not necessary that you will have a robust internet connection throughout our interviews thus affecting your total participation time. Therefore, I would like you to consider where you want to be during the online interview, for example, a safe space in your home where you can emote freely and talk privately. Additionally, during the course of the interview, if any information leads the researcher to believe that you or someone in your immediate setting (for example, a child or sibling) are at risk of significant harm, I will discuss this with you and refer it to relevant agencies for your support.

 Suggested sources of support:

- **Karma Nirvana National Helpline**
Provides support to victims of Forced Marriage and so called 'Honour Based' Abuse. Open Monday - Friday 9:00AM-5:00PM

- 0800 5999 247
- www.karmanirvana.org.uk

- **24-Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline**
Provides support, help and information to women experiencing domestic violence.

- 0808 2000 247

- www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk


- **Harbour**

Provides support, help and information to women and men experiencing domestic violence.

- 0300 20 25 25
- www.myharbour.org.uk




**What will I gain from taking part?**

Participating in biographical interviews is a chance to tell your story and contribute to an important research project that aims to improve understanding of how family honour plays a role in legitimizing forced marriage and how to better support individuals who experience it.

When we meet, I will answer any questions you may have before we begin the interview. As stated above, you are free to withdraw from this process at any time and are free to refuse to answer any of the questions.

Also, if you do participate in the research and there are particular things that you do not wish to be included, you can let me know and I will not refer to these when I write up the research.

**What if something goes wrong?**


If you feel something has gone wrong or would like to raise an issue/complaint, you can contact my supervisors, Professor Catherine Donovan: catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk or Dr Alison Jobe: alison.jobe@durham.ac.uk

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

As a participant of the research, your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications when I write up the findings of the research. I will give you, with your agreement, a pseudonym(i.e. a fake name) in any write up about the research and in my PhD thesis. However, if you tell me something that worries me regarding your safety, I might have to share it with someone else- such as a professional or someone you trust. I will let you know if I plan to do this. Your data (your interview story) will only be shared with your interviewer, and her supervisory team as necessary to complete the requirements of my PhD and write up my thesis.

**What will happen to the results/findings of the research project?**

In the third year of my research (2021/22), I will be writing up my research in a report known as thesis which will then be reviewed by an exam board of the University of Durham. If my thesis is accepted it

will be published in Durham's University e-library. I will be working in a variety of ways to make sure that my findings have impact – that they matter and are meaningful and relevant to the lives of survivors of forced marriage and honour-based violence. I will seek to share what I have found in a number of different ways to ensure that people know about them. This could include academic conferences, training material, and inputting into Government Consultations or Select Committees and publishing in journals amongst other things.

**Who has ethically reviewed this research?**

This research has been ethically approved via the Department for Sociology at Durham University's ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

**What if I have other questions?**

If you have further questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me

**Research Consent Form**

I would be grateful if you would complete this consent form prior to being interviewed, thank you.

| | |
|---|---|
| • I have read and understood the information sheet. | Yes / No |
| • I agree to being interviewed and it being audio recorded. | Yes / No |
| • I understand that any recording will be stored securely until transcribed and then destroyed, and will not be used for any other purposes without my consent. | Yes / No |
| • I am willing for interviews to be transcribed and extracts used in this research and in other materials such as reports, articles and teaching. | Yes / No |
| • I wish to remain anonymous (that is, no views or comments to be attributed directly to me by name). | Yes / No |

Name……………………………………………………………………………….

Signature……………………………………………………………………………

Date………………………………………………………………………………

Researcher Information:


Ayurshi Dutt

Doctoral Researcher

32 Old Elvet DH1 3HN

Email: ayurshi.dutt@durham.ac.uk

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title of study:** <u>Exploring women's experiences of abuse and control in the context of forced marriage within British South Asian communities</u>

You are being invited to take part in some research. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why I am conducting the research and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully.

**What is the purpose of the research?**

I am conducting this research to explore how survivors of forced marriage experience and interact with the notion of family honour or *izzat* during the process of forced marriage- i.e. before, during and after the forced marriage. This research intends to make sense of how honour influences individuals' marital decision-making. Additionally, this research will develop an understanding of survivors' agency and how they negotiate, challenge or succumb to a forced marriage. As this is a relatively under-researched topic, this research can signpost how multiple other forms of violence, abuse and control co-occur alongside a forced marriage, thus also proving to be beneficial to gender-based violence practitioners.

**Who is carrying out the research?**

I am Ayurshi Dutt, a Doctoral Researcher at Durham University. I also have a professional background of working as a frontline support provider in gender-based violence sector in India and Nepal. I have also briefly worked with UNICEF India. I am originally from India and speak Hindi and Urdu fluently. I hope to provide a safe and comfortable interview environment to you so that your voice, views and experiences are well understood and reflected in my research.

**Why have I been chosen?**

I want to invite safeguarding professionals from the gender-based violence sector and police officials supporting victims of forced marriage, honour-based violence and domestic abuse to participate in a one-on-one online interview and talking about their experience of working on cases of forced marriage in the UK.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is completely up to you whether you take part or not. You will be asked to sign a consent form to say that you are happy to participate in the research. However, you can still change your mind and stop participating (also called 'withdrawing'). If you decide to participate, but later wish to withdraw from the study, then you are free to withdraw any time up to October 2021, without giving a reason and without penalty.

**What do I have to do?**

You will participate in a one hour long interview where you share your experience of working with victims and survivors of forced marriage, their specific needs in terms of support at all stages of the forced marriage- before, during and after, the challenges you face during the process of safeguarding and how you make sense of the victim-survivors' ability or inability to accept, challenge or succumb to a forced marriage.

In line with government's health and safety guidelines on Covid-19, these interviews will be conducted online via Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or via a telephonic call. If this is something you are not on board with, please discuss with me so that I can arrange to conduct the interview physically in a socially-distanced manner.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Our sessions will be recorded if you agree. I will take handwritten notes if you express your discomfort with audio recordings. The audio recordings are made to make it easier for me to remember and record your views/experiences. They will be transcribed and then the recording will be deleted. The interview transcript will be analysed and excerpts from your interview might be used in written reports/publications and verbally presented material in conferences/workshops/the classroom. Your raw data will only be viewed by the researcher and her two supervisors. The data collected will be anonymized. We can discuss how you would like to be referred to in my work (e.g. either by your professional role title or if you object, by a generic reference to your affiliation to a GBV organization or the police).

The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as the transcriptions have been done and checked. Only the researcher will have access to the original recordings. The transcriptions will be destroyed no later than 10 years after the conclusion of this project. I will not hold your personal data once right to withdraw expires (October 2021) as it will be analysed within a wider, anonymised, data set.

According to data protection legislation, and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). For further information about the University's data protection and retention policy please see:

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

As such, I do not foresee any serious disadvantages or risks in participating in this research. However, sometimes reflecting back on some cases can be upsetting or distressing. You can take time out whenever you wish. You do not have to answer every question in our discussions; you have the right to say no to questions if you do not wish to answer them. At times, our conversations may get emotionally triggering and I would like you to consider your location during the online interview, for example, a safe space in your home where you can talk freely.

**What will I gain from taking part?**

Participating in this research is a chance to tell how you effectively support victims-survivors of forced marriage and honour-based violence. You will also contribute to an important research project that aims to improve understanding of how family honour plays a role in legitimizing forced marriage and how to better support individuals who experience it. By participating in this research, you are also signposting some practical challenges in supporting individuals facing or escaping a forced marriage, which have the potential to be heard at a wider policy and legal level. When we meet, I will discuss with you if you are happy for your comments to be attributed to you and I will also answer any questions you may have before we begin the interview.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel something has gone wrong or would like to raise an issue/complaint, you can contact my supervisors- Professor Catherine Donovan: catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk or Dr Alison Jobe: alison.jobe@durham.ac.uk

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

Your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications when I write up the findings of the research. I will give you, with your agreement, a pseudonym (i.e. a fake name) in any write up about the research and in my PhD thesis. The data from your interview will only be shared with me and my supervisory team as necessary to complete the requirements of my PhD and write up my thesis.

**What will happen to the results/findings of the research project?**

In the third year of my research (2021/22), I will be writing up my research in a report known as thesis which will then be reviewed by an exam board of the University of Durham. If my thesis is accepted it will be published in Durham's University e-library. I will be working in a variety of ways to make sure that my findings have impact – that they matter and are meaningful and relevant to the lives of survivors of forced marriage and honour-based violence. I will seek to share what I have found in a number of different ways to ensure that people know about them. This could include academic conferences, training material, and inputting into Government Consultations or Select Committees and publishing in journals amongst other things.

**Who has ethically reviewed this research?**

This research has been ethically approved by the Department for Sociology at Durham University. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

**What if I have other questions?**

If you have further questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me:

**Research Consent Form**

I would be grateful if you would complete this consent form prior to being interviewed, thank you.

| | |
|---|---|
| • I have read and understood the information sheet. | Yes / No |
| • I agree to being interviewed and it being audio recorded. | Yes / No |
| • I understand that any recording will be stored securely until transcribed and then destroyed, and will not be used for any other purposes without my consent. | Yes / No |
| • I am willing for interviews to be transcribed and extracts used in this research and in other materials such as reports, articles and teaching. | Yes / No |
| • I wish to remain anonymous (that is, no views or comments to be attributed directly to me by name). | Yes / No |
| • If 'NO' to the above, I am happy for views or comments to be attributed directly to me by my name/organization's name. | Yes / No |

Name………………………………………………………………………………….

Signature………………………………………………………………………………

Date……………………………………………………………………………………

Researcher Information:

Ayurshi Dutt

Doctoral Researcher

32 Old Elvet, DH1 3HN

Email: ayurshi.dutt@durham.ac.uk

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title of study:** Exploring 'honour' rationales behind forced marriages within British South Asian communities

You are being invited to take part in some research. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why I am conducting the research and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully.

**What is the purpose of the research?**

I am conducting this research to explore how the notion of family honour or *izzat* influences individuals' marital decision-making. More specifically, this research makes sense of the presence or not of honour or *izzat* during the decision-making process leading to a marriage. As this is a relatively under-researched topic, this research can signpost the influence of honour in the decision-making process, thus also proving to be beneficial to gender-based violence practitioners, especially in responding to forced marriages.

**Who is carrying out the research?**

I am Ayurshi Dutt, a Doctoral Researcher at Durham University. I also have a professional background of working as a frontline support staff in gender-based violence sector in India and Nepal. I have also briefly worked with UNICEF India. I am originally from India and speak Hindi and Urdu fluently. So, if you wish, we can also partially conduct the interview in these languages. I hope to provide a safe and comfortable interview environment to you so that your voice, views and experiences are well understood and reflected in my research.

**Why have I been chosen?**

I want to invite members of the South Asian community living in the UK who identify as having an arranged marriage or a love marriage to participate in a safe space to talk about how they got married, what their expectations from marriage were and if they felt involved in the decision-making process.

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I am also inviting members of the South Asian community who are not yet married but do not mind sharing how they envisage their marriage and decisions around it.

I am asking you to participate because you are at least or above 18 years of age, have had an arranged marriage, or a love marriage or are still single. You can also be divorced or engaged.  Additionally, you belong to Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi community.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is completely up to you whether you take part or not. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form to say that you are happy to participate in the research. However, you can still change your mind and stop participating (also known as 'withdrawing'). If you decide to participate, but later wish to withdraw from the study, then you are free to withdraw any time up to October 2021, without giving a reason and without penalty.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Our sessions will be recorded if you agree. If not, then I will be taking detailed handwritten notes. The audio recordings are made to make it easier for me to remember and record your views/experiences, They will be transcribed and then the original recording will be deleted. The interview transcript will be analysed and excerpts from your interview might be used in written reports/publications and verbally presented material in conferences/workshops/the classroom. Your raw data will only be viewed by the researcher and her two supervisors. The data collected will be anonymized.

Any data collected, in both written and digital formats, will be securely stored in either a locked cabinet or in Durham University cloud and password protected desktop- all of which only the researcher will have access to. The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as the transcriptions have been done and checked. Only the researcher will have access to the original recordings. The transcriptions will be destroyed no later than 10 years after the conclusion of this project. I will not hold your personal data once right to withdraw expires (October 2021) as it will be analysed within a wider, anonymised, data set.

Further information regarding the data protection and retention policy of Durham University can be found                                                                                                                                          at: www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/consent/privacynoti ce/

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

At times, reflecting back on some specific life incidents can be upsetting or distressing. You can take time out whenever you wish. You do not have to answer every question in our discussions; you have the right to say no to questions if you do not wish to answer them. Sometimes, our conversations may get emotionally triggering and I would like you to consider your location during the online interview, for example, a safe space in your home where you can talk freely and privately. Additionally, during the course of the interview, if any information leads the researcher to believe that you or someone in

your immediate setting (for example, a child or sibling) are at risk of significant harm, I will discuss this with you and refer it to relevant agencies for your support.

<u>Suggested sources of support:</u>

- **Karma Nirvana National Helpline**

Provides support to victims of Forced Marriage and so called 'Honour Based' Abuse. Open Monday - Friday 9:00AM-5:00PM

- 0800 5999 247
- www.karmanirvana.org.uk

- **24-Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline**

Provides support, help and information to women experiencing domestic violence.

- 0808 2000 247
- www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

- **Harbour**

Provides support, help and information to women and men experiencing domestic violence.

- 0300 20 25 25
- www.myharbour.org.uk

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel something has gone wrong or would like to raise an issue/complaint, you can contact my supervisors- Professor Catherine Donovan: catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk or Dr Alison Jobe: alison.jobe@durham.ac.uk

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

Your participation will be kept strictly confidential and will also not be disclosed in any way to other people participating in this research- who may or may not happen to know you. You will not be identified in any reports or publications when I write up the findings of the research. I will give you, with your agreement, a pseudonym (i.e. a fake name) in any write up about the research and in my PhD thesis. The data from your interview will only be shared with me and my supervisory team as necessary to complete the requirements of my PhD degree and write up my thesis.

**What will happen to the results/findings of the research project?**

The information I collect will be used to inform my PhD thesis at Durham University, write reports, participation in academic conferences, publish journal articles and may be used for teaching and research training. My written PhD work may also include quotations from our meetings, but you will be anonymous throughout, that is, I will not attribute any views or comments to any name.

**Who has ethically reviewed this research?**

This research has been ethically approved by the Department for Sociology at Durham University. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

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