



KARMA NIRVANA

Supporting victims of honour-based abuse
and forced marriage

Child Marriage

in England & Wales

2020: Child Marriage is not illegal
2021: Child Marriage is illegal

Time for Change

Safeguard Futures
End Child Marriage



About Karma Nirvana

Karma Nirvana is a national leading charity in the field of Honour Based Abuse, including forced marriage and female genital mutilation. We exist to support, empower and educate all those impacted by Honour Based Abuse throughout the UK.

We work to 'break the silence' on Honour Based Abuse by empowering those affected to speak out and by 'shining the spotlight' on Honour Based Abuse to improve national understanding, detection and practice. We have been working in this field for over 25 years. Our founder, Dr Jasvinder Sanghera CBE, was awarded a CBE honour in recognition of her outstanding contribution towards tackling Honour Based Abuse.

Karma Nirvana **delivers the government-backed Honour Based Abuse helpline**, which supports all those impacted by Honour Based Abuse. We also offer training to professionals and regularly work with police, UK Forced Marriage Unit, UK Border Force, NHS, social services, local government and teachers.

We provide a range of **educational resources** to understand and tackle Honour Based Abuse through **accredited training programmes, seminars, conferences and workshops**.

We were finalists for the Helpline Impact Award in 2016; awarded the British Asian Business Community Award in 2015; were highlight Commended by The Charity Awards in 2015, and were Finalists for the Most Admired Charity by Third Sector Awards in 2015.

We are co-chairs to the UK Girls Not Brides partnership and are currently working in partnership with Pauline Latham to end Child Marriage across England and Wales. Karma Nirvana is the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Honour Based Abuse.

Child Marriage – An England and Wales perspective

Child Marriage is often viewed as a ‘developing world issue’ and one that takes place exclusively overseas. The reality is that Child Marriage is an invisible but thriving issue in Britain today. It is present in every single area of the UK but is hidden in plain sight. **Since 2017**, the Karma Nirvana helpline has **responded to 375 cases** relating to Child Marriage.

The governments Forced Marriage Unit has recorded 1,235 cases relating to Child Marriage during the same time. It is estimated that the actual number of Child Marriage cases that take place or are planned in the UK is significantly higher. This briefing will highlight the issue of Child Marriage as it presents in England and Wales, including prevalence and how current law and policy is failing to protect children.

Most importantly, this briefing exposes real life Child Brides experiences as heard on the national helpline. Within this briefing we have amplified the voices of survivors who are standing behind our campaign to **End Child Marriage**.

What is Child Marriage?

Child Marriage is defined as:

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Any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child



Essentially, Child Marriage is by basic definition the marriage of any child. In England and Wales, forced marriage and Child Marriage are often conflated as being synonymous with each other when in reality this is not the case.

Not every Child Marriage is considered a forced marriage by statutory definition of forced marriage. There are many children who are considered as “consenting” to marriages with some of the youngest cited as young as 8 years old.

How does Child Marriage take place in England and Wales?

In our experience, Child Marriage takes place in 3 different ways:

01 **A child is married in a legally recognised registered marriage at the age of 16 or 17 with either parental or judicial consent.**

Office of National Statistics (ONS) data shows that in the last 10 years, for which there is data available (2006 – 2016), there were 3,354 marriages involving children aged 16 and 17 registered in England and Wales.

Since 1970, there has been a gradual increase in the average marriage age of females with the current age averaging at 36 years. This reveals a significant and broader societal shift from the historic normalisation of marrying at a young age to one which now focuses on the importance of education for all children.

This has been enshrined in law through the ‘school leaving age’ being raised from 16 to 18. ONS data demonstrates the gendered nature of this issue, with the overwhelming majority of registered marriages aged 20 years and under being female.

In our experience at Karma Nirvana, the vast majority of marriages registered at 16 and 17 where parental consent has been provided takes place through ‘parental coercion’. Frontline workers report that many children are coerced into marriage, with some parents “glamorising” marriage for children as young as 12 years.

02 **A British child is party to a religious or customary marriage, either in the UK or abroad. These marriages can take place at any age and whilst are not legally recognised, they are not against the law.**

Registered marriages only highlight part of the picture of the Child Marriage problem in England and Wales. Worryingly, there is no official recording mechanism to capture the number of children married by religious or customary marriage. These non-registered marriages highlight some of the complexities of understanding the true extent to which Child Marriage takes place in the UK.

There are many known cases to statutory frontline workers, including police officers and social workers, that do not feature in Home Office Annual Data Returns or OFSTED inspection reports. Within this report, we share 22 British Child Marriage stories that have been shared with Karma Nirvana during 2020 that do not account in government statistics anywhere.

The hidden nature of religious and customary Child Marriages in England and Wales is one that threatens the future of thousands of girls across Britain. We urge the government to recognise Child Marriage as a British problem, rather than one which exclusively ‘takes place overseas’.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2017#age-at-marriage> | ²<https://www.gov.uk/when-you-can-leave-school>

03 **A British adult (mainly male) marries a child (mainly female) abroad. This child is then brought into the UK.**

We recognise that Child Marriage is also being perpetrated by (mainly) men from England and Wales against children overseas. Children who experience such marriages are usually girls who are commonly controlled through fear, violence and threats.

Measuring the data:

The hidden problem and impact of Child Marriage

Whilst a Child Marriage could also be a forced marriage, it is an incorrect presumption that every case of Child Marriage is also a forced marriage. By statutory definition, a forced marriage within the meaning of s121 of the Anti-social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 is where:

1. A person commits an offence under the law of England and Wales if he or she -
 - (a) Uses violence, threats or any other form of coercion for the purpose of causing another person to enter into a marriage, and
 - (b) Believes, or ought reasonably to believe, that the conduct may cause the other person to enter into the marriage without free and full consent.
2. In relation to a victim who lacks capacity to consent to marriage, the offence under subsection (1) is capable of being committed by any conduct carried out for the purpose of causing the victim to enter into a marriage (whether or not the conduct amounts to violence, threats or any other form of coercion).

The definition of forced marriage requires evidence of violence, threats or any other form of coercion for the purpose of causing a person to enter into marriage, unless a victim lacks capacity within the meaning of the Mental Capacity Act 2005. The law does not recognise age as a standalone factor in determining lack of capacity to consent. As such, children are not automatically considered as lacking capacity to consent to a marriage.

This raises real issues for police officers and social workers when working with children, some as young as 10 years old, that are “consenting” to marriages in Britain. It is also important to highlight that Child Marriage does not automatically instigate child safeguarding procedures and many frontline workers have voiced their concerns on how responding to Child Marriage is particularly challenging when the child is not being “forced”.

How current law and policy is failing to protect children

One of the main challenges of current law is that there is no explicit crime of Child Marriage at any age, including under 16, the minimum age that a marriage can be registered. A Child Marriage under the age of 16, that is either religious or customary, is simply void (not legally binding or recognised) unless it qualifies as a forced marriage. Current law and policy legitimises Child Marriage by requiring a child to recognise a marriage as “forced” in order to get protection from it.

Current law and policy fail to recognise that many children are ‘conditioned and influenced’ from early childhood, by their parents and within their community, to desire and ‘celebrate’ having a Child Marriage. Many statutory frontline workers report that some children feel stigmatised if they do not marry before 16. Children are not educated about the harms of Child Marriage and often only receive education on marriage from within their familial and community setting.

Comparisons to other laws designed to protect and safeguard children

Across the UK, many laws exist to ensure that children are protected from risk of harm. Most recently on the 2nd September 2020, a statutory code was introduced to ensure that organisations providing online services and products likely to be accessed by children up to the age of 18 are “age appropriate”. The Age Appropriate Design code centralises the “best interests” of the child above and beyond any other consideration. Similarly, children up to the age of 18 are not allowed to:

- Purchase alcohol
- Vote
- Leaving education or training
- Join the armed forces
- Take out a mortgage or hold full property ownership
- Enter into most contractual arrangements such as a credit card or loan
- Purchase or hire an air weapon
- Undertake jury service
- Purchase tobacco, cigarettes or other smoking products, include vapes. It is also illegal for an adult to smoke in a car with someone who is under 18
- Purchase fireworks
- Place a bet (gambling)
- Take part in an exhibition or performance of hypnotism
- Make, distribute, possess or show any indecent images of anyone aged under 18, even if the content was created with the consent of that young person (sexting)
- Drive a medium or heavy goods, or large passenger vehicle
- Buy a knife, razor blade, crossbow or axe
- Use sunbeds
- Purchase volatile solvents, including eyelash glue and paint thinner
- Purchase Videos, DVDs and Computers with certification 18+

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A generation from now will be astonished that there was ever a time when children could legally and without retribution to perpetrators, get married in England and Wales.

Natasha Rattu
Executive Director of Karma Nirvana

The absence of action to end Child Marriage in England and Wales legitimises the practice. Perpetrators are not held to account when subjecting children to marriage. Equally, children conditioned to normalise Child Marriage do not receive a counter message to dispute the conditioned legitimacy many children have been primed with by family since early childhood.

International commitments

We believe that current law is undermining the UK's international work to end Child Marriage. The government is recognised as taking a leading role internationally as a force for ending Child Marriage.

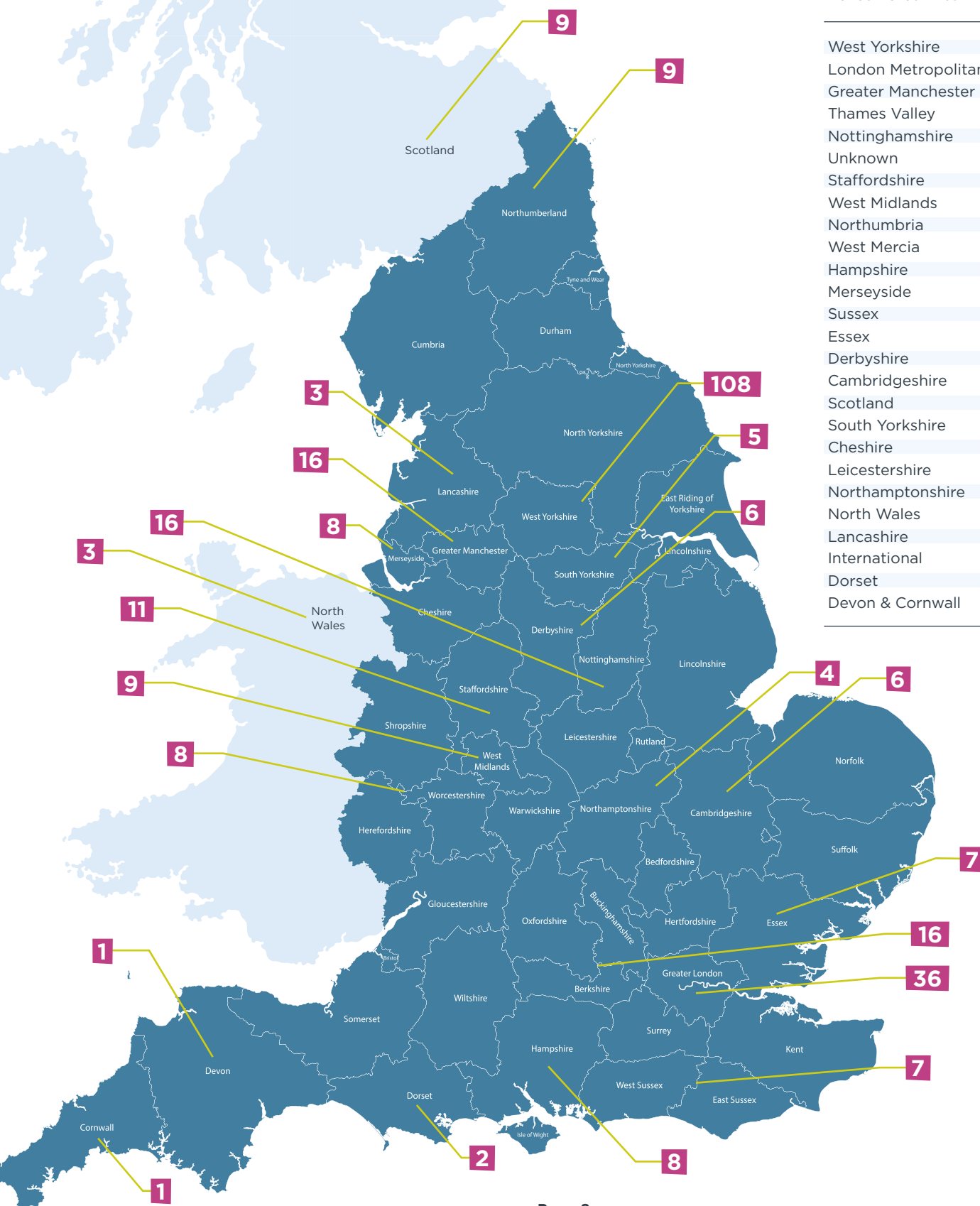
Contrary to the government's determination to lead on ending Child Marriage internationally, domestic law significantly undermines these efforts. This is demonstrated by the action of Bangladesh to lower the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 16, with citation of the UK as an example. In support of lowering the age, Ministers in Bangladesh have been cited as stating **“But Child Marriage is legal in the UK – so why shouldn't it be allowed here?”**

The UK has worked hard to ensure the inclusion of Child Marriage within Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals and a specific target has been achieved. This is a timely opportunity to bring domestic legislation in line with global commitments to end Child Marriage under target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.



Child Marriage cases across the UK — Police Force

The map and table below evidences both case numbers and corresponding %'s of Child Marriage victim **known locations** for the last 3 and half years, by Police Force area.



Police Force Area	% of cases
West Yorkshire	34%
London Metropolitan	11%
Greater Manchester	5%
Thames Valley	5%
Nottinghamshire	5%
Unknown	4%
Staffordshire	3%
West Midlands	3%
Northumbria	3%
West Mercia	3%
Hampshire	3%
Merseyside	3%
Sussex	2%
Essex	2%
Derbyshire	2%
Cambridgeshire	2%
Scotland	2%
South Yorkshire	2%
Cheshire	2%
Leicestershire	2%
Northamptonshire	1%
North Wales	1%
Lancashire	1%
International	1%
Dorset	1%
Devon & Cornwall	1%

Our proposal to end **Child Marriage**

Karma Nirvana are members of and UK co-chair to the Girls Not Brides global partnership to End Child Marriage. We envision a world where girls are not denied an education or deprived of their fundamental rights as a consequence of Child Marriage.

We seek government support to endorse The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill to:

- 01 Remove enablers of Child Marriage, specifically parental and judicial consent. This will ensure the minimum age for registering a marriage is 18 without exceptions.**
- 02 Make Child Marriage a crime in England and Wales**
- 03 To introduce Child Marriage Protection Orders to provide civil remedy to Child Marriage, akin to Forced Marriage Protection and Female Genital Mutilation Orders**

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As the National Policing Lead for Honour Based Abuse, Forced Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation, I am delighted to lend my support to this campaign to see a change in the law to prevent Child Marriage under 18. Society has moved on since these antiquated laws, more needs to be done to protect children when they are vulnerable between the ages of 16 and 17, not to be forced into what is effectively Child Marriage. A change in the law, making it clear that all marriage under 18 were a crime, would assist all parts of the criminal justice system in protecting children.

Commander Ivan Balhatchet
National Police Chiefs Council
National Portfolio holder for Honour Based Abuse Forced Marriage and FGM



Helpline Child Marriage Stories

This briefing includes 22 Child Marriage stories heard on the national Honour Based Abuse helpline in 2020.

These British Child Marriage stories show how and why Karma Nirvana are working to end Child Marriage. All case studies have been anonymised.



Helpline Child Marriage Story 01

South Yorkshire Police contacted our helpline after they received a referral relating to Sofia and Elena both aged 15 years. They had been reported missing by their school after not returning from school holidays.

Further investigation identified that both girls had been married in a customary wedding in Sheffield. They were now living in the South East with their respective husbands and in laws. South Yorkshire Police endeavoured to pursue “forced marriage” charges but were unable to evidence “duress and coercion” as both children had “consented” to the marriages.

Sofia and Elena

January 2020
Sheffield

Helpline Child Marriage Story 02

Hannah is 11 years old and has autism. An assessment has identified that Hannah is currently 6 years behind her mental age. Hannah’s mother has planned for her to marry her cousin who lives in Pakistan and is 10 years older than her. Mother has informed Hannah’s school of the plans.

When the mother has been challenged by Children’s Social Care, she has denied the plans and accused the school of being ‘culturally insensitive’.

Hannah

April 2020
Manchester

Helpline Child Marriage Story 03

Zara is 12 years old. She told her teacher that her father was going to get her married and that she was scared. Zara was taken into care and her father was prevented from any contact with her.

Zara

March 2020
Liverpool

Helpline Child Marriage Story 04

A social worker rang our helpline with concerns for 16 year old Karina. Karina's father attempted to marry his daughter to an 'older male' in exchange of money to pay for his debt. Karina managed to escape her family and now lives in care.

Karina

July 2020

Manchester

Helpline Child Marriage Story 05

A social worker called our helpline concerned about 16 year old Lara. Lara's parents discovered she had a boyfriend and physically assaulted her upon this discovery. Her parents told her that she must marry a relative in Afghanistan.

Lara was taken into care and our helpline offer her regular ongoing support. There has been a history of social care involvement with older siblings - all of whom were married as children.

Lara

August 2020

London

Helpline Child Marriage Story 06

Matilda (13 years) and Malia (15 years) were taken to Afghanistan to marry men who they had been promised to. Malia told her teacher about the planned marriage and the school then refused her parents 'holiday request' to Afghanistan.

When the marriage concerns were addressed by the teacher to the mother, the mother informed the teacher it was "just some misunderstanding". A 1-week holiday request was then put in to travel to Turkey just before the Christmas half term.

The school approved the new holiday request. The girls did not return back to school as expected in the new year. The school received a disclosure from another pupil at the school to indicate that Matilda and Malia had travelled to Afghanistan and were now married to adult men.

Matilda and Malia (sisters)

January 2020

Hull

Helpline Child Marriage Story 07

A social worker called our helpline concerned about 14 year old Ana. Ana's family discovered that she had a boyfriend and are now planning to take her to Pakistan to get married.

Ana disclosed that she has experienced physical and emotional abuse from her father, including threats to kill. Ana was placed into care and receives regular support from the helpline team. Her father is awaiting trial for assault and threats to kill.

Ana

August 2020
Birmingham

Helpline Child Marriage Story 08

Lancashire Police rang our helpline to discuss safety measure for 12 year old Alayna. Alayna's mother is British White and her father British Pakistani.

Alayna's mother overheard Alayna's grandparents discussing Alayna's engagement on a planned visit to Pakistan in March 2020.

Alayna

February 2020
Surrey

Helpline Child Marriage Story 09

A social worker contacted our helpline concerned for Halima, a 15-year-old girl, who was taken to Bangladesh over a year ago.

A cousin in the UK raised concerns that Halima's family were planning to get her married in Bangladesh. There was Forced Marriage Unit intervention in this case to repatriate Halima.

Halima

September 2020
Surrey

Helpline Child Marriage Story 10

A social Worker called our helpline about 14 year old Maria. Maria was married in a customary wedding in Kent to her 17 year old husband. She was made at the age of 14 to live with her husband and in laws.

Maria was taken out of education as soon as she got married. Maria disclosed her Child Marriage to school staff when taking her husband's siblings to school. Whilst at the school, police were called and Maria was taken initially into police protection, followed by care proceedings.

Maria disclosed experiencing physical and sexual abuse by her husband and his family.

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Child Marriage is “The done thing” and presented as glamorous. Often children actually look forward to this and see the dress/cake/celebration etc so they actually “consent” which makes it very difficult for frontline practitioner to challenge. If Child Marriage was against the law would make it much easier.

Social worker

Maria

June 2020
Kent

Helpline Child Marriage Story 11

Roshni, a survivor of honour based abuse, contacted our helpline out of concern for her younger sister Nisha who is 15 years old. Roshni and Nisha have regular secret contact and Nisha has informed Roshni that there is talk of Nisha being taken to India to get married.

Roshni ran away from a Child Marriage at 15 – she fled her home town of Leeds to London. Roshni contacted our service to support a plan to enable Nisha to escape her Child Marriage.

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Her life and autonomy are in danger, just like mine was when I was about to turn 16

Nisha's Sister, Roshni

Roshni and Nisha

October 2020
Leeds

Helpline Child Marriage Story 12

Serina contacted our helpline service for support and guidance. When Serina was 10 years old, she was engaged to her cousin who was 10 years her senior. At 15 years old, she had a religious marriage and by the time she was 17 she moved in with her husband and in laws in Middleborough.

Serina attended school during this time and whilst she did not have the courage to speak out, teachers equally did not spot the signs. Serina is now 31 years old and has 3 children aged 12, 10 and 9.

Serina

September 2020
Middlesbrough

Helpline Child Marriage Story 13

Amanda contacted our helpline to raise concerns for her 16 year old daughter Lucy. Amanda explained that Lucy had converted religion and that she had attended a “community house where Muslim women meet”.

Amanda explained that one of the women at the community centre acted as a “matchmaker” between Lucy and the woman’s son Adam aged 24. Lucy met Adam in a room behind a curtain and following a one hour discussion agreed to marry in a religious ceremony. Amanda called our helpline to ask how she could protect her daughter from this marriage.

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On one hand I have parental responsibility, but on the other hand I can’t stop her as a child from getting [religiously] married

Mother of Child Marriage victim

Lucy

September 2020
London

Helpline Child Marriage Story 14

16 year old Mia contacted our helpline service as her family discovered she had a boyfriend. She has been presented with the ultimatum to stop seeing her boyfriend or to marry him.

Mia indicated that she would have to marry her boyfriend as she was unable to promise not seeing him.

Mia

April 2020
Surrey

Helpline Child Marriage Story 15

Jemima, 20 years old, called our helpline to explain that her parents took her to Pakistan at the age of 14 to get married. She explained that she told her school teacher about the planned wedding, but that school spoke to her parents who denied such plans.

The school accepted her parents account. Whilst in Pakistan, Jemima explained that she was raped until she became pregnant at the age of 15. After becoming pregnant she was then allowed to return to the UK. Jemima explained that she could not cope after giving birth to her child and as a result her child was removed from her care.

Jemima

October 2020
Birmingham

Helpline Child Marriage Story 16

When Josie was 15 years old she was seen with a boy who was not from her 'community'. This information went back to her church and she was asked to take a 'virginity test'. Josie's mother told her that she had brought "shame" and that every bad thing that had happened in the family was her fault.

Josie fell into depression and her GP referred her to counselling. Josie's mother attended every counselling session so Josie was never able to speak. When Josie was 16 she began dating a boy in secret but this eventually 'got back to the church'. Josie was then physically assaulted, but through the support of our helpline, she managed to escape.

Josie

September 2020
Nottingham

Helpline Child Marriage Story 17

Rizwana contacted our service after discovering that her family had been planning her marriage since she was 15. She recalled being pressured to talk to "family friends" in Bangladesh over video call, to later discover that these so called "family friends" were her future mother and father in law.

Rizwana's prospective husband was 11 years her senior. She contacted our service as she did not want to get married and wanted help to escape.

Rizwana

August 2020
Northampton

Helpline Child Marriage Story 18

Fifteen year old Amal called our helpline to explain that she has been duped into going on holiday to Iraq to discover her family had planned to get her married.

She explained that her husband wanted her to live in Iraq but she managed to convince him to allow her to return to the UK to work under the proviso that she would sponsor him to the UK. She contacted us on her return to the UK, asking for help to escape her controlling and violent family.

Amal

January 2020

Leeds

Helpline Child Marriage Story 19

Nadia, now aged 23, called our helpline to explain that when she was 10 years old she was informed by her family that when she was 16 she would be married to her relative who was 8 years older than her. From the age of 12 years old she was taken out of mainstream schooling and sent to a “strict Islamic school” in the UK.

When she turned 15, her family began preparing for her marriage and at 17 she was taken to Pakistan to marry her relative. Nadia told us that she had tried to take her life on 4 occasions prior to the marriage.

Nadia

August 2020

Birmingham



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