



Research Finding: Bangladesh Case Study

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Covid-related restrictions appear to have decreased the number of cases handled by the FMU with Bangladesh as a “focus country” in real terms: there were almost half the number of cases compared to 2019. This is a more-significant decrease than the decrease in total calls to the FMU in 2020.

The clearest impact appears to have been on the age of victims: a greater percentage of cases (though fewer people in real terms) involved people aged 15-and-under, or 18-21. This may have been related to school closures, and Universities and most workplaces moving to working/studying from home, though this does not explain the lack of equal impact on people aged 16-17.

There were also notable impacts on calls from London, the West Midlands, the Northwest, and the East. These may be associated with the longer, and tighter, Covid-related restrictions experienced in at least the first three of these areas.

Bangladesh frequently features as a “focus country” in statistics from the FMU. In this Case Study we are interested in whether the 2020 statistics published by the FMU show any significant impacts on cases with Bangladesh as a “focus country” during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

Bangladesh has been identified by the UK government’s Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) as a “focus country”. According to the FMU, ‘a “focus country” is the country to which the risk of forced marriage relates. This could be the country where the forced marriage is due to take place, the country where it has taken place, and or the country in which the spouse is currently residing’.²

Since 2017, the FMU has provided more detail on cases from the most frequent ‘focus countries’; Bangladesh has consistently appeared as one of these countries, accounting for 9% of cases, on average, each year between 2017 and 2020.³

The FMU provides help to citizens of any country inside the UK, and to British nationals overseas.⁴



That is, in cases where Bangladesh is listed as a “focus country”, the case might involve a British national taken to Bangladesh for a forced marriage; a British national being forced to marry a Bangladeshi national in the UK; and/or a Bangladeshi national being forced to marry someone in the UK.

Number of Cases

	Number cases where Bangladesh was a “focus country”	Total Number of Cases
2017	129	1196
2018	133	1507
2019	144	1355
2020	69	759

Table 1: Cases handled by the FMU where Bangladesh was a “focus country”, 2017-2020.

In general, in 2020 the FMU handled 50% of the number of cases they handled in 2018, and 56% of the number in 2019. For cases specifically linked to Bangladesh, the FMU handled 48% of the number of cases in 2020 compared to 2019, and 52% of the number of cases in 2018. There was a more-substantial decline, then, in cases with Bangladesh as a focus country in 2020 than in cases in general.

In 2020, 93% of cases handled by the FMU did not have the UK as their focus country. In 2019, that figure was 95%, in 2018 93%, and in 2017 90%. The relative decline in cases connected to Bangladesh then, is not due to a general decline in cases involving non-UK countries, though – of course – there was a substantial decrease in total cases, so we can only compare percentages. Still, it seems that Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions had a more significant impact on cases

with Bangladesh as the focus country than on cases in general.

Similarly, this decline is not part of a pattern which existed before the pandemic. Rather, cases with Bangladesh as the focus country were steadily increasing pre-pandemic.

Sex of Victims

	% Female	% Male	% Unknown
2017	71	29	-
2018	77	19	5
2019	81	19	-
2020	81	19	-

Table 2: Sex of victims in cases handled by the FMU 2017-2020 in cases with Bangladesh as a focus country.

Prior to 2020, 71-81% of cases handled by the FMU with Bangladesh as the focus country related to female victims: in 2020 this remained at 81%. Covid-19 does not, then, seem to have had any effect on the sex of those most at risk of forced marriage.

The overall tendency seems to be that more women are becoming victims of forced marriage in cases where Bangladesh is the focus country, as the numbers increased from 71% to 81% between 2017 and 2020. It is worth noting, however, that 19% of cases handled by the FMU each year between 2018 and 2020 relating to Bangladesh have male victims, as forced marriage is generally assumed mainly – perhaps only – to affect females. Furthermore, in 2017, male victims accounted for nearly a third of all cases although this seems to be an outlier.



Age of Victims

The age of victims in cases handled by the FMU with Bangladesh as a focus country change quite substantially year-on-year, though the data for 2017 and 2019 are similar. Very generally, victims are more likely to be under the age of 21 than to be older than that. (This is true even in 2018, when the age-group with the largest number of victims was 22-25.) 2020 saw a significant increase in the proportion of victims aged 15 and under, and 18-21. The number of victims aged 16-17 was in line with other years.

Age Range	2017	2018	2019	2020
15 & under	20 (16%)	12 (9%)	23 (16%)	14 (20%)
16-17	16 (12%)	18 (14%)	17 (12%)	10 (14%)
18-21	28 (22%)	28 (21%)	36 (25%)	20 (29%)
22-25	16 (12%)	32 (24%)	20 (14%)	9 (13%)
26-30	14 (11%)	16 (12%)	22 (15%)	8 (12%)
31-40	11 (9%)	12 (9%)	9 (6%)	<5
41 & over	5 (4%)	5 (4%)	<5	<5
Unknown	16 (12%)	10 (8%)	15 (10%)	4 (6%)

Table 3: Age Range of Victims in Cases Handled by the FMU 2017-2020 with Bangladesh as a “focus country”.

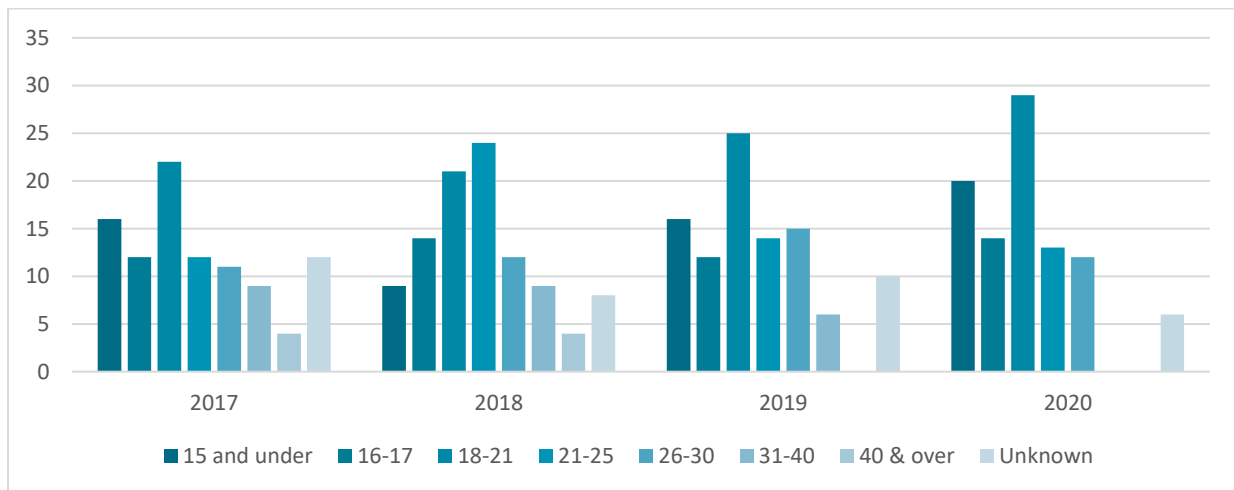


Figure 1: Age of victims with Bangladesh as the focus country, 2017-2020 (percentage of total cases).⁵

This is an interesting finding, as it suggests that Covid-related measures such as school and FE College closures, and Universities moving to on-line learning (with students mainly based at home), alongside most employers moving to working-from-home, may have had an impact, but not on a key demographic of 16–17-year-olds. Of course, we are only comparing percentages here, and the total number of cases fell in all age groups (though there were more victims aged 15-and-under in 2020 than in 2018). Still, this suggests Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions had a specific impact on victims aged 15-and-under and 18-21 where Bangladesh was the focus country.



Regions

UK Region	2017	2018	2019	2020
London	48 (37%)	29 (22%)	41 (28%)	23 (33%)
West Midlands	6 (5%)	18 (14%)	20 (14%)	6 (9%)
North West	12 (9%)	17 (13%)	17 (12%)	6 (9%)
East	9 (7%)	13 (10%)	14 (10%)	7 (10%)
South East	9 (7%)	13 (10%)	11 (8%)	<5
East Midlands	10 (8%)	11 (8%)	8 (6%)	6 (9%)
South West	-	-	<5	<5
Wales	5 (4%)	5 (4%)	6 (4%)	<5
North East	7 (5%)	-	<5	<5
Yorkshire & The Humber	-	-	<5	<5
Scotland	-	-	<5	-
Unknown	15 (12%)	11 (8%)	14 (10%)	7 (10%)

Table 4: Region of cases handled by the FMU 2017-2020 where Bangladesh was the focus country.

As the number of cases from each region has fluctuated year-on-year, it is hard to discern any direct impacts of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions.

The largest number of cases in 2020 were reported in London, as seen in previous years, despite case numbers almost having halved since 2019.

The dramatic decrease in cases associated with the West Midlands is notable (though 6 cases is in line with 2017). There were also fewer than, or exactly, half the number of 2019 cases in the North West, South East, and the East. This is a more-significant decline than in cases with Bangladesh as a focus country over-all. Thus, there may have been more significant impacts from Covid-19 and

Covid-related restrictions in these areas than across the rest of the country.

The West Midlands and the North West did experience more-severe restrictions, and for a longer period of time, than other areas of the UK in 2020 (after the initial “lockdown” was lifted). (See Figures 2-6.) The change we can see in cases from these regions, then, may show the impact of Covid-related restrictions (such as restrictions on households mixing and/or the closure of indoor venues such as might be used in weddings) on forced marriages.

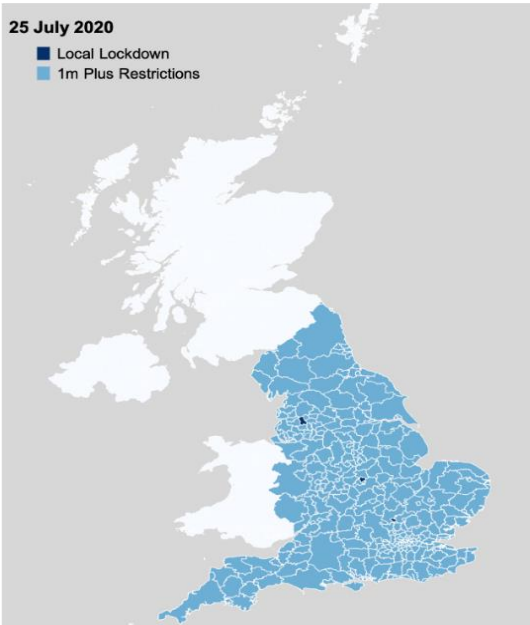


Figure 2 Covid-related restrictions in England, July 2020.

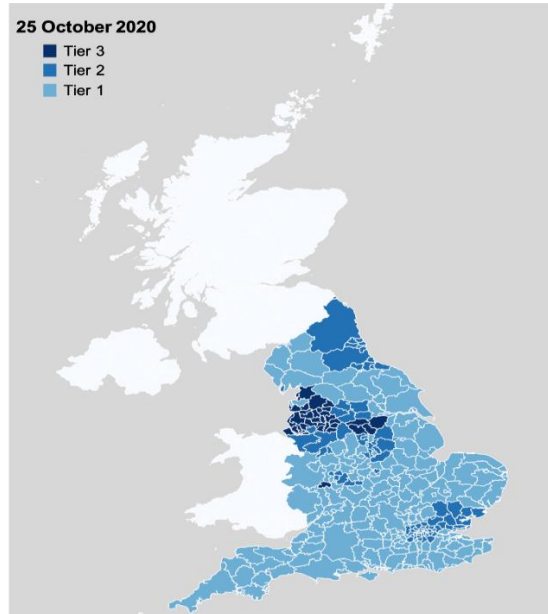


Figure 6: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 December 2020.

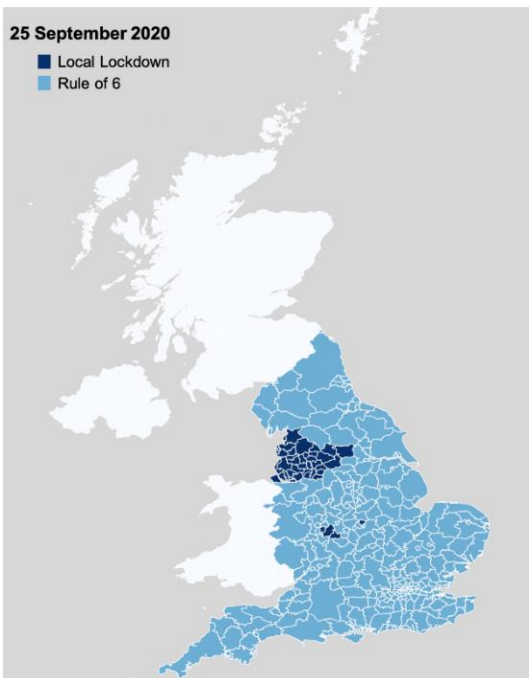


Figure 3: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 September 2020.

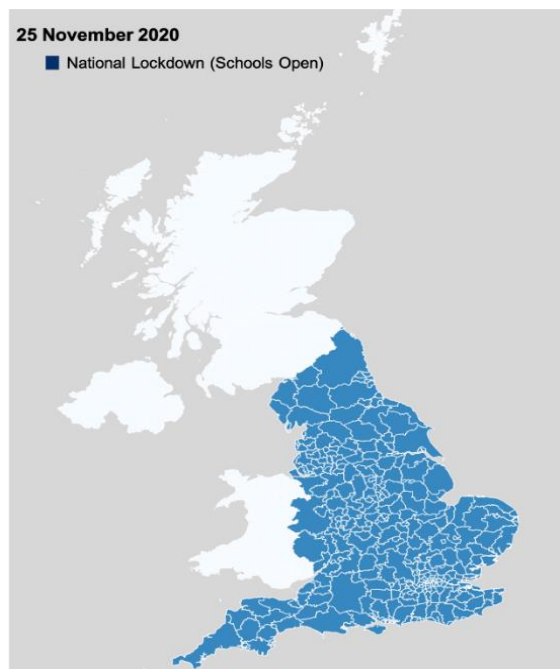


Figure 5: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 November 2020.

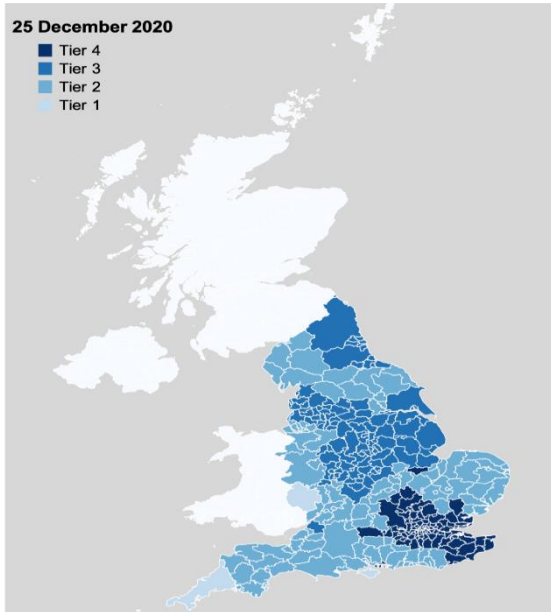


Figure 6: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 December 2020.

A note of caution should, however, be sounded: a decline in the number of cases handled by the FMU does not necessarily mean a decline in cases – it only shows a decline in the number of people who made contact with the FMU, and this may not mean an actual decline in forced marriages. The regional data, therefore, may show that in places where longer, and tighter, restrictions were imposed, it was harder for people at risk to contact the FMU, and/or for those third parties tasked with safe guarding them to spot signs they were at risk, and contact the FMU on their behalf.

Since 2017, an increasing number of victims in cases where Bangladesh is the focus country have first made contact with the FMU when they were already overseas. Although the actual number of people involved was roughly half that of 2019, a very similar percentage of people were already in Bangladesh when they first made contact with the FMU in 2020.

Despite Covid-related restrictions on international travel imposed by both the British and Bangladeshi governments, there has been little change in the percentage of victims than in previous, non-pandemic years, who were overseas when they contacted the FMU. As a percentage, this has been increasing since 2018 (and in real numbers, there was an increase between 2018 and 2019).

Given travel restrictions imposed by both British and Bangladeshi governments, travel to and from Bangladesh was limited in 2020. Travel became more limited at the end of March 2020, when Bangladesh imposed a 10-day “shutdown” and suspended all domestic and international flights.⁶

UK citizens/residents were advised against “inessential” travel (though travelling for a wedding may have counted as being “essential”).⁷ After the first “lockdown”, the FCDO advice against international travel remained, and self-isolation rules were brought in for arrivals to the UK.⁸

In May 2020, Bangladesh lifted its suspension of domestic flights and mandated a 14-day quarantine procedure

Victim Status

	UK	Overseas	Unknown
2017	91%	9%	
2018	88%	11%	1%
2019	83%	16%	1%
2020	81%	17%	1%

Table 5: Victim Status in cases where Bangladesh was the “focus country” handled by FMU 2017-2020.

“Victim status” refers to whether the victim was in the UK when they contacted the FMU, or overseas (i.e. in Bangladesh).



for travellers arriving in Bangladesh.⁹ However, on 26 August 2020, Biman Bangladesh Airlines – the national flag carrier of Bangladesh, which provides

international passenger and cargo services to 42 countries – suspended international flights until 15 September.¹⁰

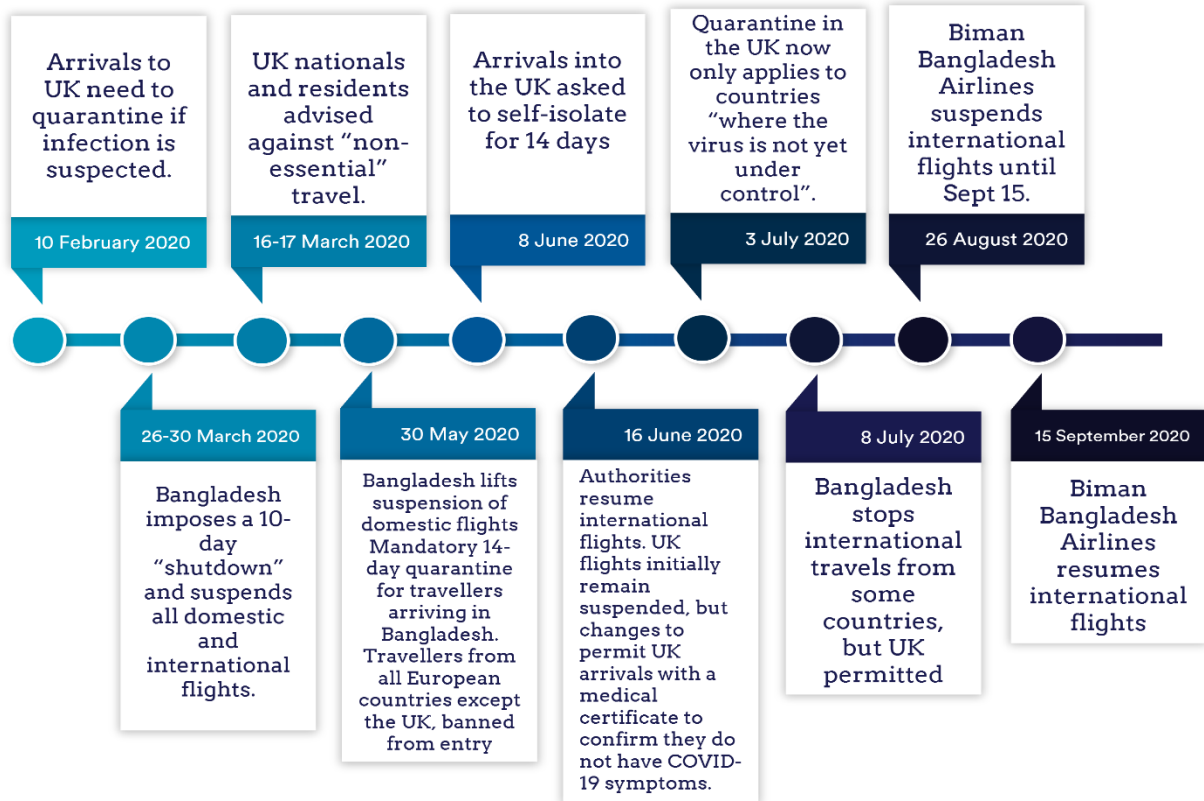


Figure 2: Timeline of relevant travel restrictions.

The main window for international travel to/from Bangladesh, then, would be January to March 2020; June to August 2020; and mid-September to December 2020. This partly coincides with school and university holidays, and victims aged under 21 accounted for 63% of cases with Bangladesh as a focus country in 2020.

Given that people evidently were taken abroad for the purposes of forced marriage, despite travel from the UK supposedly only being for "essential" purposes, this suggests that travel for weddings could have been judged as

"essential", or that people were travelling abroad under false pretences. More investigation of the planned weddings which were providing the reason for travel might have prevented victims being taken abroad for forced marriage in 2020.

Similarly, given that 12 people were abroad when they first made contact with the FMU in cases where Bangladesh was a focus country, this suggests even more might be done by UK Border Force to spot signs of people being taken out of the UK for forced marriages, and by the UK Home Office to provide help at airports.



That said, people do not always know they are being taken out of the country for a forced marriage, though general travel “for holidays” to Bangladesh should not have been possible during most of 2020. However, other “essential” purposes (for instance, attending family funerals) could have been used as an excuse to travel for the purposes of forced marriage.

Further Work

We continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions on forced marriage in the UK. This case study is part of a series on all the “focus countries” for which the FMU has provided detailed data in 2020 – In, Pakistan, Afghanistan studies, we will be able to consider broader findings and recommendations.

References

¹ This is an update from the ESRC-funded project (ES/V015270/1) investigating the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on forced marriage in the UK.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>

³ See data available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage>.

⁵ See data available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁶ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/03/23/govt-offices-to-remain-closed-till-april-4>.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51917562> Last accessed 25.8.21.; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-16-march-2020>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/travel-advice-foreign-secretary-statement-17-march-2020>;

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-new-public-health-measures-for-all-uk-arrivals>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-the-coronavirus-press-conference-3-june-2020>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-3-july-2020>.

⁹ <https://travelbans.org/asia/bangladesh/>.

¹⁰ <https://travelbans.org/asia/bangladesh/>