



Research Finding: Pakistan Case Study

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61 cases of forced marriage handled by the UK Government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) in 2020 involved people who were in Pakistan when helped, despite significant restrictions on travel between both countries in 2020

Covid-related restrictions appear to have decreased the number of cases handled by the FMU with Pakistan as a "focus country" both proportionally and in real terms.

However, Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions do not seem to have affected any particular case or type of forced marriage. That is, no clear impacts can be seen on sex, age, or location of victims within the UK.

However, a higher proportion of victims were overseas when they contacted the FMU than in other, pre-pandemic, years. This may suggest victims found it harder to contact the FMU before being taken abroad in 2020.

Introduction

Pakistan 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 Pakistan as a "focus country" during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

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'.

Since 2017, the FMU have provided more detail on cases relating to the most-frequent "focus countries". Pakistan is the most-common "focus country" for cases handled by

the FMU, accounting for 42% of cases, on average, each year between 2011 and 2019.

The FMU provides help to citizens of any country inside the UK, and to British nationals overseas.¹ That is, in cases where Pakistan is listed as a "focus country", the case might involve a British national taken to Pakistan for a forced marriage; a British national being forced to marry a Pakistani national in the UK; and/or a Pakistani national being forced to marry someone in the UK.

According to the 2011 census, Pakistani was the third-largest ethnicity in England and Wales (behind White British and Indian), with 2% of the population of England and Wales (1.125 million people) identifying themselves as Pakistani.² In Scotland, 50,000 people identified themselves as Pakistani.³ Pakistan was one of the three most-common non-UK countries of birth in 2011 (alongside India and Poland).⁴ Although we should be very wary about stereotyping those at risk of forced marriage⁵, Pakistan is the "focus country" in a very large number of cases handled by the FMU, and it seems likely that a significant number of people at risk of a forced marriage



where Pakistan is the “focus country” are of Pakistani heritage.

Number of Cases

	Number of Cases in Pakistan	Total number of cases in the UK and abroad
2017	439	1,196
2018	687	1,507
2019	559	1,355
2020	286	759

Table 1: Number of cases handled by the FMU where Pakistan 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 connected to Pakistan, in 2020 they handled 41.6% of the number of cases in 2018, and 51% of the number of cases in 2019. There was a slightly more-substantial decline, then, in cases with Pakistan 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 involving Pakistan, 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 (most obviously, travel restrictions) had a more significant impact on cases with Pakistan as the focus country than on cases in general.

Sex of Victims

Prior to 2020, 75-79% of cases handled by the FMU with Pakistan as the “focus country” related to female victims: in 2020 this was 80%, despite far fewer actual cases. (Cases handled by the FMU in 2020 were half those of 2018, and 56% of 2019 volumes.⁶⁾ Covid-19 does not, then, seem to have had any effect on the sex of those most at risk of forced marriage. It is worth noting, however, that just over 20% of cases handled by the FMU each year relating to Pakistan have male victims, as forced marriage is generally assumed mainly – perhaps only – to affect females.

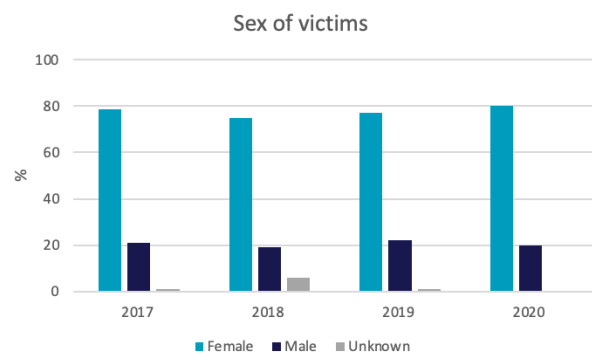


Figure 1: Sex of victims in cases handled by the FMU 2017-2020 in cases with Pakistan as a “focus country”.

Age of Victims

Age Range	2017	2018	2019	2020
15 and under	60 (13.7%)	119 (17%)	60 (11%)	47 (16%)
16-17	57 (13%)	125 (18%)	71 (13%)	36 (13%)
18-21	85 (19.4%)	132 (19%)	138 (25%)	68 (24%)
22-25	66 (15%)	101 (15%)	81 (14%)	41 (14%)
26-30	64 (14.6%)	71 (10%)	68 (12%)	30 (10%)
31-40	37 (8.4%)	49 (7%)	53 (9%)	30 (10%)
41+	11 (2.5%)	12 (2%)	16 (3%)	8 (3%)
Unknown	58 (13.2%)	78 (11%)	72 (13%)	26 (9%)

Table 2: Age Range of Victims in Cases Handled by the FMU 2017-2020 with Pakistan as a “focus country”.



Data shows that people of all ages are victims of forced marriage with Pakistan as a “focus country”. Generally, 2-3% of cases involve victims aged 41 and over: this was the same in 2020. Similarly, the 10% of cases involving people aged 31-40 is in line with previous years (7-9%). The 10% of cases involving those between 26 and 30 is also in line with data from 2018 and 2019 (though not 2017, which is something of an outlier). The 14% of cases in 2020 concerning people aged 22-25 is also broadly in line with past years.

The data for younger people shows more differences year-on-year. The proportion of victims aged under 15, and between 16 and 17 both seem to fluctuate around 15%. 2019 saw a marked increase in the proportion of victims aged 18-21, which has continued into 2020.

Overall, then, there were no significant differences in the age of victims in 2020 compared to other years. Covid-19, and Covid-related restrictions, then, do not seem to have impacted a particular age-group when it comes to the risk of forced marriage. School closures, for instance, do not seem to have made it much more likely that younger people would be forced into marriage (in a case involving Pakistan as a “focus country”). This said, given the significant decrease in calls in the FMU in this period, we should be wary – it might simply be that Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions such as school-closures made it harder for young people, or third parties concerned about them, to contact the FMU.

Regions

UK Region ⁸	2017	2018	2019	2020
West Midlands	85 (19.4%)	94 (14%)	92 (16%)	45 (16%)
London	63 (14.4)	85 (12%)	65 (13%)	42 (15%)
North West	69 (15.7%)	122 (18%)	85 (15%)	39 (14%)
Yorkshire and Humberside	52 (11.8%)	119 (17%)	75 (13%)	33 (12%)
South East	30 (6.80%)	60 (9%)	55 (10%)	33 (12%)
East	18 (4.10%)	43 (6%)	44 (8%)	24 (8%)
Scotland	11 (2.5%)	9 (1%)	13 (2%)	9 (3%)
East Midlands	28 (6.40%)	24 (3%)	19 (3%)	7 (2%)
South West	8 (1.8%)	14 (2%)	11 (2%)	<5 (0%)
Wales	5 (1.1%)	9 (1%)	11 (2%)	<5 (0%)
North East	18 (4.1%)	8 (1%)	9 (2%)	<5 (0%)
Unknown	52 (11.8%)	100 (15%)	80 (14%)	43 (15%)

Table 3: Number of cases per region handled by FMU with Pakistan as a “focus country” 2017-2020.⁹



The main “outlier” in terms of region in 2020 is the increase in cases from the South East, though there was an increasing trend from 2017 (6.8% of cases) to 2019 (10%), and 2020 may be a continuation of that. There were roughly half the number of cases reported in the South West, Wales and the North East than in earlier years, in line with the general fall in cases handled by the FMU in 2020.

Census data shows – perhaps not surprisingly – that regions which are most likely to report cases of forced marriage with Pakistan as a “focus country” to the FMU are the areas of the UK with the largest populations who identify as Asian/British-Asian/Scottish-Asian.

Many of these areas also suffered from more-lengthy and more-severe Covid-19 restrictions (and higher rates of Covid-19 infection) in 2020. Although Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions appear to have impacted the total number of cases handled by the FMU, they do not appear to have had a significant impact on the likelihood of specific regions reporting cases of forced marriage with Pakistan as a focus country in 2020.

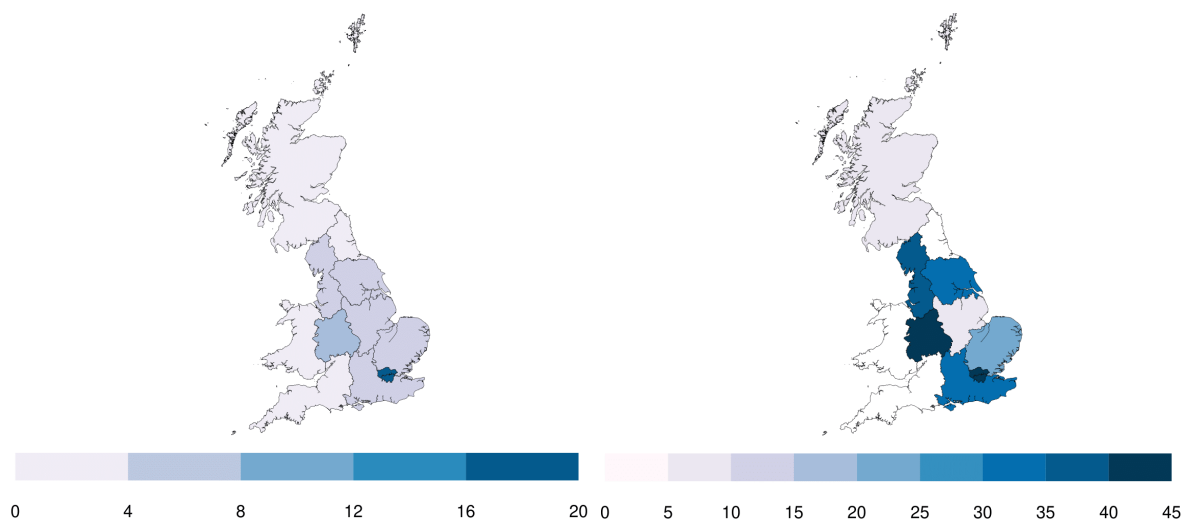


Figure 2: The proportion of each region identifying as Asian/Asian British/Asian Scottish in 2011 Census in (left) and the number of cases per region handled by FMU with Pakistan as a “focus country” in 2020 (right).

Victim Status

Victim Status	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overseas	54 (12.3%)	97 (14%)	87 (16%)	61 (21%)
In the UK	379 (86.3%)	582 (85%)	471 (84%)	221 (77%)
Unknown	6 (1.4%)	8 (1%)	1 (0%)	4 (1%)

Table 4: Victim Status in cases where Pakistan 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 Pakistan).

Despite Covid-related restrictions on international travel imposed by both the British and Pakistani governments, a higher percentage of victims than in previous, non-pandemic, years were overseas when they contacted the FMU (and, correspondingly, a



smaller percentage were in the UK). The number of overseas cases was smaller than in 2019 and 2018 (as was expected, given the general decline in cases handled by the FMU in 2020), but higher than in 2017. In general, however, cases with Pakistan as a focus country handled by the FMU in 2017 were higher than in 2020 (439 to 286).

Given travel restrictions imposed by both British and Pakistani governments, travel to and from Pakistan was limited in the 2020. In March 2020, Pakistan limited the number of airports operating international flights and then suspended all flights, while UK citizens/residents were advised against “inessential” travel (though travelling for a wedding may have counted as being “essential”).¹⁰

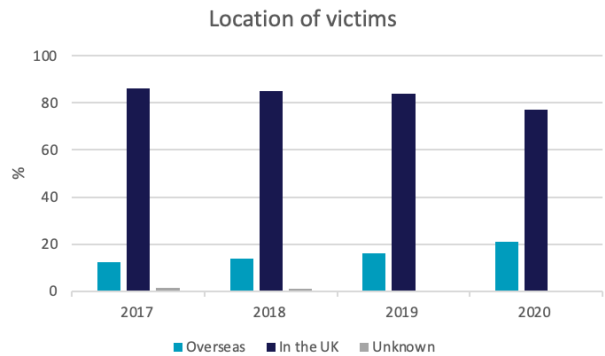
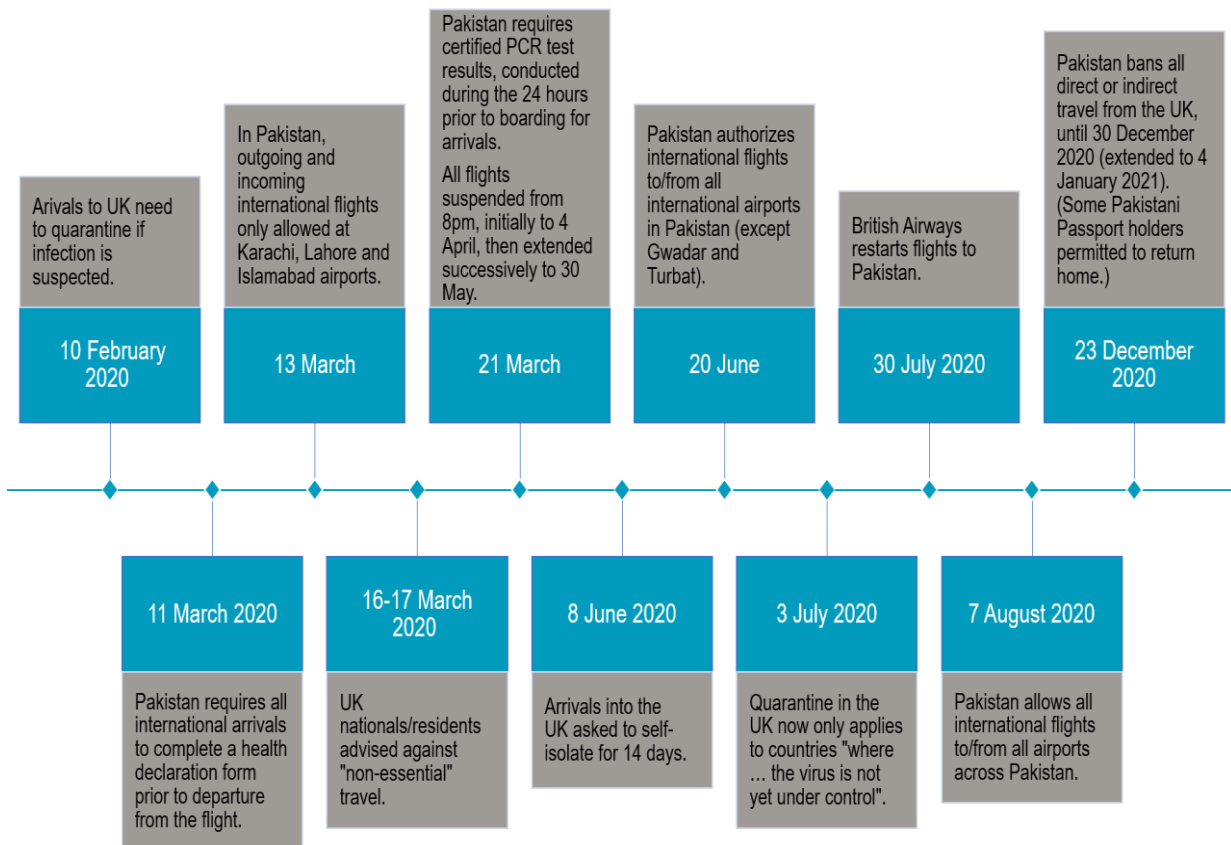


Figure 3: Location of victims when contacting the FMU

Figure 4: Timeline of key events



After the first “lockdown”, the FCDO advice against international travel remained, and self-isolation rules were brought in for arrivals to the UK.¹¹ In July, some “travel corridors” were opened, but not to Pakistan, though British Airways restarted flights to Pakistan on 30 July 2020.¹² Pakistan banned all direct or indirect travel from the UK on 23 December 2020 until the end of the year.¹³

The main window for travel to/from Pakistan, then, was January to March 2020 and August to December 2020. Data from the FMU suggests that at least 61 people were taken abroad for forced marriage in these time-periods. This partly coincides with school holidays (broadly, 21 July 2020 to 28 August 2020 in England and Wales), though, as noted, not all victims were school-age.

32% of the cases handled by the FMU in 2020 occurred in January, February and March (so, broadly speaking, pre-“lockdown”). Only 6% of cases were handled in August. However, in total, 73% of total cases were supported in the identified window for travel to/from Pakistan.

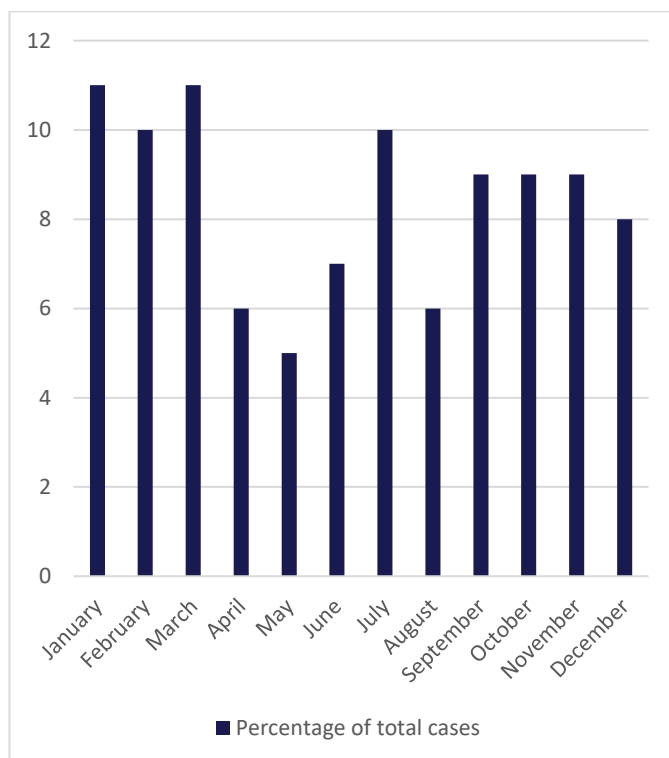


Figure 5: Percentage of cases handled each month in 2020 by the FMU (total).

Given that travel to Pakistan was, at least for the August to December period, supposed to be limited for “essential” travel only, this suggests that travel for weddings was judged “essential”; that people said they were travelling for purposes

acknowledged to be “essential” (e.g. attending family funerals), but with the intention of forcing someone to marry; and/or that people were travelling abroad unchecked for non-essential purposes.

It is not clear whether any statutory bodies (e.g. UK Border Force), travel agencies, or airline companies had a duty to check whether travel was for “essential” purposes, or whether this was left to individuals’ own judgement and sense of obligation regarding following government guidance. Similarly, the rule about “essential” travel was, in the period studied here, government guidance (rather than law), and it not clear what penalties could have been imposed on people travelling for non-essential purposes if this was discovered to be the case, or whether they could have been refused service by travel agencies or airlines. It will be useful to compare the data for 2021 (when travel restrictions were legally binding) to see whether this made a difference to the number of cases of forced marriage handled by the FMU where the victim was already abroad (in Pakistan, and other countries). We look forward to seeing, and analysing, this data from the FMU (likely to be published in summer 2022).

UK Border Force already receive training on spotting signs of travel for purposes of forced marriage, and are part of the “spoon” initiative set up by Karma Nirvana.¹⁴ Evidently, though, this has not been enough – even in 2020 – to prevent people being taken abroad for the purposes of forced marriage. (Though it ought also to be noted that sometimes people do not know that is the purpose of their travel at the airport, as they are taken abroad under false pretences.) Vigilance by, and training for, relevant staff at airports remains vital, particularly as travel restrictions ease.

The increase in cases with Pakistan as a focus country involving victims who were already overseas when they were supported by the FMU may point to victims having difficulty contacting the FMU when in the UK. Covid-related restrictions are likely to have kept them in the same house as those forcing them to marry with few opportunities to seek outside help, and little chance for concerned third parties to spot warning signs and contact the FMU on their behalf. (This said, other national helplines, for instance the national helpline run by Karma Nirvana, have seen an increase in total calls during 2020, so evidently people at risk could reach some sources of support.¹⁵)



Conclusion

Covid-related restrictions appear to have decreased the number of cases handled by the FMU with Pakistan as a “focus country” both proportionally and in real terms. Overall, cases handled by the FMU decreased by 44% on the number from 2019: cases with Pakistan as the focus country fell by 49%.

However, there was no clear disproportional impact on any age-group; sex; or UK region, despite Covid-19 restrictions being more-severe and of longer-duration in some areas than in others.

One significant change, however, is in the proportion of victims who were already abroad when they first made contact with the FMU: 21% compared to an average of 14% between 2017 and 2019. This means that, despite significant restrictions on travel between Pakistan and the UK for much of 2020, 61 were taken abroad for the purposes of forced marriage, and made contact with the FMU only once they were already abroad.

References

- ¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage>.
- ² <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>.
- ³ <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/ethnicity/>
- ⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/internationalmigrantsinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>.
- ⁵ For more on this see, for example, Sundari Anitha and Aisha Gill, ‘Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK’, *Feminist Legal Studies* 17(2) (2004), 165-184 and ‘A Moral Panic? The Problematisation of Forced Marriage in British Newspapers’, *Violence Against Women* 21(9) (2015), 1123-1144.
- ⁶ See <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/july/impact-of-covid-19-on-calls-to-the-forced-marriage-unit.pdf>
- ⁷ In 2017, there was both “unknown” and “unknown adult”. We have included the “unknown adult” figure here, “unknown” was fewer than 5 (0.2%).
- ⁸ It is notable that Northern Ireland is not included here. This chimes with our more-general finding that there is very little data on this issue in Northern Ireland.
- ⁹ This might be the “home” region of the victim, and/or the region in which the marriage was planned to take place.
- ¹⁰ ¹⁰ <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>; https://twitter.com/official_pcaa/status/1241372417072734210?s=20; https://twitter.com/official_pcaa/status/1245377007631900672?s=20; https://twitter.com/official_pcaa/status/1248302701441683456?s=20;

In itself, this is a significant figure, and finding. It may mean people at risk found it harder to contact the FMU from the UK (perhaps because of Covid-related restrictions, such as school closures and “stay at home” orders). It may mean people were less aware they were being taken abroad for the purposes of a forced marriage than in other years. Definite data on this is hard to collect, given the difficulty of conducting interviews with those at risk, and those who were forcing them to marry, but we continue to look for ways to safely engage with survivors as part of this project.

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 the first in a series on all the “focus countries” for which the FMU has provided detailed data in 2020 – India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Somalia and the UK. Once we have prepared all these case studies, we will be able to consider broader findings and recommendations.

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- https://twitter.com/official_pcaa/status/1341256275317932041?s=20;
- https://twitter.com/official_pcaa/status/1341395871288668166?s=20.
- ¹⁴ Karma Nirvana’s Spoonful of Hope initiative helped the UK Border Force to rescue girls and women subject to forced marriage before they set off airport metal detectors: <https://karnanirvana.org.uk/get-involved/donate/a-spoonful-of-hope/>
- ¹⁵ Overall calls to Karma Nirvana’s helpline increased by 36% in 2020, see <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/september/briefing-impact-of-covid-19-on-forced-marriage.pdf>.