



# Impact of Covid-19 Lockdowns on Practitioners: Findings from Initial Qualitative Interviews

---

Research briefing by:

Dr Rumana Hashem

Dr Katarina Schwarz

Dr Helen McCabe

This paper presents a summary of initial findings from four pilot interviews held with practitioners at Karma Nirvana (KN) and Southall Black Sisters (SBS) examining the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on practitioners working to prevent and address forced marriage in the UK.

This is an update from the ESRC-funded mixed method research project assessing the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on forced marriage in the UK (ES/V015370/1).

## Overview

The interviews revealed that during the first Covid-19 lockdown, Government responses to forced marriage and Covid-19, as well as the pandemic in general, significantly impacted both organisations and those working within them.<sup>1</sup>

The mental and physical health of frontline service providers working within these organisations and service-users were affected by the pandemic. Government responses to the protection needs of people at risk of forced marriage, and to the call for financial support to BAME women's organisations working to provide services to migrant and minority women subject to forced marriage and domestic abuse, were reported to be "poor" and "delayed" during the first lockdown. However, both KN and SBS continued to provide services by changing their working patterns overnight (from 23 March and 18 March 2020 respectively).

Staff and leaders of both organisations took on additional work and committed to performing "emotional labour" to ensure that the quality of their service to those at risk of forced marriage and those already experiencing it remained high. This was on top of already significant workloads.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown, survivors of forced marriage experienced negative impacts on their wellbeing as a result of pandemic restrictions. Survivors reported to KN that Covid-related restrictions had "triggered their trauma".

---

# Background

Between March and May 2021, we conducted four qualitative interviews with practitioners at KN and SBS, who are two key stakeholders in addressing forced marriage in the UK.

**Karma Nirvana** is a specialist charity for victims and survivors of forced marriage and honour-based abuse in the UK. They run the national Home Office commissioned Honour Based Abuse and forced marriage helpline, train frontline practitioners and professionals, gather data to inform policies and services, and campaign for change.

**Southall Black Sisters** is a not-for-profit organisation established to meet the needs of Black (Asian and African-Caribbean) women. They provide comprehensive services to women experience violence, abuse, and other forms of inequality, as well as conducting campaigning and advocacy activities.

## Key findings

Nine key observations emerged from the interviews:

- (1) The two service providers had to change working practices from in-person to online services overnight. KN changed their working practices from 23 March, while SBS shifted online from 18 March 2020. These changes had some adverse impacts on the mental health and overall wellbeing of staff and service users.
- (2) In the context of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions, both KN and SBS experienced an increase in workload. The directors took on additional roles, supporting their staff in addition to leading on many fronts and managing family responsibilities.
- (3) Service users found it hard to access services immediately in the changing service structures, and trauma of survivors was triggered during lockdown.
- (4) Access to safe accommodation and refuge was difficult, especially for migrant women, and Black and Asian Minority Ethnic women.
- (5) In the face of Government and local authority delays in providing refuge to victims and survivors of forced marriage and domestic abuse, SBS provided accommodation services to all destitute women—including victims of forced marriage.
- (6) Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions created distinct new service needs amongst both organisations' service users. However, the Government's response to calls for

improving service provision up to 30 April 2021 were reported to be poor. Covid-related funding for survivors and third sector organisations providing services to minority community women and migrant survivors was delayed, and access to create new services such as rehabilitation services, therapy, and health services, were noted to be poor.

- (7) Despite difficulties, both KN and SBS as leading service providers in the field found it useful to have options to attend meetings online and to have access to meetings with national-level policy makers.
- (8) Evidence from the pandemic period to date has not demonstrated an increase in forced marriage in the UK. Calls related to forced marriage to the national Honour Based Abuse Helpline run by KN and to the Forced Marriage Unit decreased between March 2020 and April 2021.<sup>1</sup> However, the truth about how survivors coped and the real number of forced marriages held during lockdowns may only be known after the Covid-19 pandemic is over, and with further systematic research.

## Methods

This paper presents the findings from four remote semi-structured interviews conducted between 23 March 2021 and 14 May 2021. Interviews were conducted with the directors of both organisations, as well as two additional staff from KN. The nationalities of the four interviewees (as they identified themselves) were Indian-British, White-British, mixed-British, and Asian-British. All four are women, aged between 36 and 60 years.<sup>2</sup> Interviews lasted between 60 and 105 minutes. Interviews were analysed using inductive methods, with transcripts coded in NVivo 12 software.

Interview questions were organised around seven broad themes. Each theme contained a set of three to six related questions, with discussion tailored to participants' preferences and responses.

The seven broad themes for questions were as follows:

- (1) Overall wellbeing experience
- (2) Home working environment of team leaders and their staff
- (3) Access to work support and access to support services for health and wellbeing
- (4) Mental health and wellbeing relating to Covid-19
- (5) Organisation and support provision
- (6) Forced marriage dynamics and reporting in lockdowns
- (7) Specialist support provision

# Analysis of interviews

Our analysis of the initial interviews with practitioners shows that KN changed their working practice in significant ways from 23 March 2020, and SBS changed their working pattern from 18 March 2020. This resulted in several challenges around working from home, including separating work and home-life, overall wellbeing of staff, juggling work and caring responsibilities, ensuring practitioners' own mental and physical wellbeing, and providing physical support to service-users and survivors.

Interviewees also reported significant impacts on their service users—including victims and survivors of forced marriage, honour-based abuse, and domestic abuse—who were isolating and unable to seek the physical support usually available from these service providers. These interviews provide important new data on previously unknown impacts of lockdowns on forced marriage cases and the experiences of support staff.

We identified the following seven key areas of on practitioners of KN and SBS, and their service users.

## 1. Overall wellbeing experience was adversely impacted

**Leading practitioners found the first nationwide lockdown particularly stressful and difficult for both staff and service users.** The directors of KN and SBS invested a high level of emotional labour and adopted changes, increased workload, and managed to cope with

everything in some way. Some frontline staff of these organisations found adaptation challenging, and some fell sick with Covid-19 whilst providing services to survivors and dealing with callers on national Helplines. Staff were also furloughed and affected negatively by personal losses due to Covid-19, as well as housing and financial difficulties in pandemic.

**Workload significantly increased, with challenges in the separation between work and home.** Most practitioners in KN and SBS, including the directors and all frontline staff, took on additional roles both physically and emotionally. Except those on furlough due to the lack of demand for the training they provide while priorities for statutory professionals were elsewhere, everyone's workload changed while working from home in lockdowns. As working patterns had changed from in person to online, the directors of KN and SBS noticed an increase in workload and worked longer hours themselves. Frontline staff were not required to work during weekends and evenings, but they took additional roles which they completed within expected/usual working hours.

**Working day and hours of work changed.** Due to working-from-home, workload for staff at both KN and SBS significantly changed during lockdown. Both directors reiterated that they were working overtime, long hours, and weekends during lockdowns and throughout pandemic (between 23 March

2020 and end of April 2021). Driven by their commitment to supporting service users, particularly where public services **Additional roles for the directors of organisations** included extending service provision, ensuring service was suitable and emergency services were available for those in need, looking after staff when they needed support, and ensuring that everyone received debriefing sessions and online therapy during lockdowns. In addition to these, one director took on responsibilities for children during school closures during the national lockdown in 2020. Challenges in transitioning technology were also noted by both organisations.

**Frontline practitioners faced financial hardship and illness.** One staff-member who was a point of contact before the pandemic to survivors at KN before lockdown was furloughed and survivors were redirected to the national helpline. Several others at SBS were negatively affected in terms of employment and finance during the first national lockdown. They were furloughed, on top of having care responsibilities during the pandemic that brought in additional stress. The government response to furloughed staff was slow. Practitioners also reported that frontline staff were ill but received little support from the Government.

## 2. Home working environment of service providers

Staff at KN and SBS experienced home working in a different way as their home working environments varied. Differences were tied to socioeconomic status. Directors did not face economic issues, although they mentioned that this was a

were lacking, staff reported working longer hours when working from home.

grey area for many staff who provide crucial services. Staff experienced difficulties and juggled work and family responsibilities while working from home.

The directors of SBS and KN did have to juggle particular family responsibilities. The task of managing an organisation from home was somewhat challenging. However, they were able to manage work effectively from home as a result of their particular personal circumstances.

## 3. Access to work support and access to support services for health and wellbeing

**Access to work support and support services for health and wellbeing** were reported to be difficult during the first lockdown. This was resolved by efficient services and effective management. This is an area that both KN and SBS practitioners particularly emphasised. Both organisations were required to change their working patterns overnight, which brought great stress. The lack of time for preparation was particularly emphasised as a challenge.

**Online services for home working staff.** To meet staff needs for access to support, KN and SBS introduced online services that could be accessed from home. These included debriefing sessions, online trainings, and therapy services. However, this work added workload for the directors.

**Responses to the question about the physical office and productivity were mixed.** Some staff did not miss their physical workspaces and did not want to rush to return to physical offices. Two interviewees stated that working from home worked better for them. They mentioned that working online from home saved their time, increased productivity, and enabled opportunities for attending meetings with policy makers that are beneficial for the service providers and their service-users. Directors of these organisations, on the other hand, did miss their office space, although they also saw the benefits of working remotely.

#### **4. Mental health and wellbeing relating to Covid-19**

Some staff managed to create a sense of separation between work and home during lockdown. Three interviewees did not access more mental health and wellbeing support than they usually would have before the pandemic. However, they reported that there were other staff who were affected. One respondent reported a personal loss related to Covid-19 in their support bubble. This triggered emotional distress and a need to access support through the organisation. The service made available for staff helped them in coping with the loss.

The director of KN emphasised that although Helpline staff play a vital role in providing services to vulnerable people, they were not considered as key-workers and hence not given priority vaccination. The lack of recognition of service

providers' frontline role was noted as a shortcoming of the official approach.

No respondent deliberately took on a new hobby for mental-health and wellbeing reasons during lockdowns and under Covid-19 restrictions—at least for some as a result of lack of time. However, they mentioned going for long walks.

#### **5. Organisation and support provision**

Respondents reported service users finding it hard to access services in the unexpected changing service structures, as nobody predicted the pandemic or that there would be a national lockdown without prior notice. Trauma of survivors was noted to have been triggered during lockdown. Isolation and confinement with perpetrators was identified as preventing those experiencing forced marriages from being able to contact helplines. The lack of disaggregated official data to properly evaluate impacts of the pandemic was also highlighted.

**Survivors found it particularly difficult to cope with Covid-19 lockdowns.** Some survivors reported to respondents that the lockdown and pandemic in general aggravated their emotional pain, bringing trauma back from the past. Survivors also reported that they were concerned about the wellbeing of their families and loved ones, as they could not imagine what might have happened in those violent households that they left where some of their loved ones were still living. Reduced opportunities for interacting with others outside their household was also highlighted as limiting opportunities for reporting.

### **Access to safe accommodation has been a crisis for migrant survivors.**

Between 23 March 2020 and May 2020, refuge was not available and accommodation of victims from Black and Asian Minority Ethnicity in local areas were hard to access from 23 March to 30 April 2021.<sup>3</sup> The UK Government has a statutory responsibility to provide safe accommodation for all victims of domestic abuse. Respondents highlighted that access to safe accommodation was an established issue in the UK prior to the pandemic, which seemed worse during Covid-19 and in particular the first nationwide lockdown.

Delays in support provision were reported at all levels, from national to local authorities. As the Government did not respond to the need for safe accommodation for victims, the local authorities were unable to respond to calls from victims and survivors for refuge, which contributed to the scarcity and suffering of people. During the first nationwide lockdown and throughout the pandemic, SBS provided accommodation services through their hostels for minority women subject to domestic abuse. [Galop, the LGBTQ Refuge](#), also took action.<sup>4</sup> However, **disparities in service provision in general were reported.**

**Poor service provision and government responses.** Overall service systems and the Government's response to calls for improvements in service provision were reported to be poor until 30 April 2021. Funding for survivors and third sector organisations providing services to minority community women and migrant survivors from the UK Government was delayed, and access to create new services such as rehabilitation services, therapy, and health services, were

reported to be poor by KN and SBS directors from the beginning of first lockdown up to the date of interviews.

## **6. Forced marriage dynamics and reporting**

During the first lockdown, forced marriage reporting was limited. The number of calls relating to forced marriage on KN's Helpline decreased during the first national lockdown and throughout 2020.<sup>5</sup> SBS did not receive any calls directly relating to forced marriage throughout 2020. However, this does not provide the full truth about forced marriage vulnerabilities because survivors were isolating, and the dynamics of their situations may have changed in ways that impacted on their ability to report. There were reports that marriages were postponed and delayed due to Covid-related restrictions. However, this does not mean that these marriages would not take place.

### **Respondents believed that forced marriage did not increase during 2020.**

Calls related to forced marriage decreased during lockdowns and throughout 2020, and SBS' director believed that this was connected to a reduction in forced marriages overall. However, this did not necessarily mean that vulnerabilities had shifted, and a risk of the forced marriages occurring after lockdowns were lifted was flagged.

Respondents further noted that the truth about the pandemic's impacts on forced marriage numbers, dynamics, and vulnerabilities, as well as how survivors coped during lockdowns could only be known after lockdowns are over.



## 7. Lessons learned to be shared for the future and for specialist support provision

Practitioners talked about positive and negative experiences connected to the experience of the pandemic, with some developments identified as highly positive.

### Important, complex, and positive lessons can be learned and shared from the experiences of practitioners.

Respondents highlighted that support to victims and survivors needs to be continued, and new plans and policies developed for prevention, tackling trauma of survivors and those at risk of

FM, and supporting those working to prevent forced marriage.

Despite all the difficulties of the pandemic, both KN and SBS as key stakeholders in the field found it useful to have options to attend meetings online and to access national-level policymakers meetings.

The impacts of a lack of preparation time in adapting to the pandemic context also provide key lessons for future practice. By translating lessons from the pandemic, service providers and policymakers can ensure that they are better prepared to respond to such shocks in the future. However, this would only be possible with concerted and ongoing effort to translate pandemic lessons for the future.

## Recommendations

The above analysis shows that key stakeholders and service providers in the sector tackling forced marriage, honour-based abuse, and domestic violence were personally impacted by the Covid-19 lockdowns and by Covid-related decision making by the UK Government, particularly during the first UK-wide lockdown.

Practitioners at KN and SBS were particularly concerned about their service users and inadequate service provision for destitute women and victims of forced marriage, honour-based abuse, domestic abuse, and gender-based violence.

The following recommendations are therefore advanced based on this research:

- (1) Service provision for survivors of forced marriage and those at risk should be improved, with greater support from the government. Particular attention should be paid to

the needs of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

- (2) All key stakeholders—including SBS, KN, Galop, the LGBTQ Refuge, and other minority women's rights charities—should be provided with timely and sufficient funding for supporting those in need of protection from forced marriage.
- (3) Housing and mental health support for victims of forced marriage and domestic abuse requires urgent attention of the government. The national government and devolved administrations need to ensure housing, financial, and health support to victims and survivors as needed. UK Government should consult the third sector service providers and create new provisions for supporting those at risk.
- (4) UK Government should recognise staff at women's rights organisations,

- particularly those providing front-line services such as the government-funded national helpline or refugee accommodation, as key workers.
- (5) It is important for UK government to reflect on welfare and wellbeing for frontline staff, factoring in clinical supervision in emergency funding particularly in light of working from home circumstances and increased frontline demand.
- (6) Lessons learned from the pandemic can help service providers and policymakers to be better prepared to rapidly adapt to potential future shocks. Concerted ongoing effort should be taken to ensure appropriate systems are put in place based on pandemic learnings.

## Further Research

There is a need for further research and investigation into how other restrictions on movement, household-mixing, and the advice to work from home have impacted other frontline staff, for example, the police officers working with victims in this sector, mental health workers, school teachers, and healthcare workers. This is an area where evidence-based policy interventions are needed. Likewise, significant attention on the medium- and long-term impacts of the pandemic and related response measures on forced marriage prevalence and dynamics in the UK is necessary to understand how patterns and trends may have changed.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>See, for information, two previous reports by our research team: McCabe, H., Hashem, R., Rattu, N., and Bonner, A. (July 2021) Impact of Covid-19 on Call Handlers Tackling Karma Nirvana's national forced marriage Helplines: Findings from an internal survey. Available from <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/july/impact-of-covid-19-on-call-handlers-tackling-karma-nirvanas-national-forced-marriage-helpline.pdf> and a report by McCabe, H., Hashem, R., Seymour, R., Lott, N., and Coggins, H. (July 2021) Impact of Covid-19 on calls to the Forced Marriage Unit: Analysis of 2020 Data. Available from <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>.
- <sup>2</sup> Interviewees have identified themselves as female. At the time of interviews held, one interviewee was 36 years old Indian British, one 42 years old mixed -White- Asian British, one 46 years old White-British, and one 60 years old Asian-British.
- <sup>3</sup> That is, till the last interview date in this first phase of interviews.
- <sup>4</sup> See details about Galop's work and campaign for LGBTQI victims of domestic violence who were stuck with their perpetrators and had nowhere to go other than choosing street: <https://galop.org.uk/>
- <sup>5</sup> See for example, McCabe, H., Hashem, R., Rattu, N., and Bonner, A. (July 2021) Impact of Covid-19 on Call Handlers Tackling Karma Nirvana's national forced marriage Helplines: Findings from an internal survey. University of Nottingham: Rights Lab. Available from <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/july/impact-of-covid-19-on-call-handlers-tackling-karma-nirvanas-national-forced-marriage-helpline.pdf> Also see a briefing by McCabe, H., Hashem, R., Seymour, R., Rattu, N., and Bonner, A. (April 2021) Impact of Covid-19 on calls to national forced marriage helplines: Initial Findings. Briefing report. University of Nottingham: Rights Lab. Available from <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/april/impact-of-covid-19-on-calls-to-national-forced-marriage-helplines.pdf> .