



Briefing: The Forced Marriage Unit's 2023 Statistics

Findings based on academic study by Dr Helen McCabe, May 2024

On 9 May 2024 the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) published its statistics for 2023. The explanatory notes helped explain previous changes in counting.

The headline fact is that the FMU gave advice and support in 17 fewer cases than in 2022 (280 cases in 2023: 297 in 2022). They also responded to 26 fewer forced marriage enquiries. This continues an on-going trend of declining cases and/or enquiries since 2018, despite the 2023 change in the law regarding child marriage.

This short briefing explores what can be learned from the data, including the special cases of forced marriage where there are mental capacity concerns, and case studies of key “focus countries”: Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Afghanistan.

Key findings

In 2023, the FMU saw another year-on-year decrease in “advice and support” cases and forced marriage enquiries.

There is no clear pattern to the calls, but spikes in March and December 2023 (and low numbers in the summer) suggest, at least, that those at risk are not making contact with the FMU before the long school holidays (usually understood to be a time of heightened risk, at least for school-age children and young people).

As in 2022, the highest number of cases were in the 18-21 age bracket, emphasising the need for all stakeholders to be more aware of the risks facing this age group, as younger people tend to be perceived to be more at risk.

There was a decrease in the percentage of “advice and support” cases concerning female victims, despite forced marriage being an issue which mainly affects women (and girls) across the globe. 69% of cases involved female victims (78% in 2022). 88 cases involved male victims in 2023: this was 67 in 2022. Although there were 86 cases with male victims in 2021, this was a smaller proportion of total cases (26%) than in 2023 (31%).

In the main, the FMU helps British nationals. In most cases, victims are also based in the UK. In almost half of cases, the forced marriage has already happened.

An increasing number of cases were from the West Midlands and there were more cases per 100,000 people in the West Midlands than in any other region. This region, London and the North West remain the regions where victims to whom the FMU gave advice and support were most likely to be located.

An increasing number of referrals to the FMU are made from other parts of the Home Office (mainly UK Borders and Immigration): this was over 1/3 of all referrals in 2023.

Why is this important?

Critically engaging with the FMU's data is important as these statistics are some of the only annually-published data on forced marriage, and certainly the one with most detail. Understanding this data can help us to further understand the issue of forced marriage in the UK, even though it can only ever give a very partial view, as not all cases come to the attention of the FMU.

The FMU also has a vital role to play in supporting victims and ending forced marriage in the UK, so it is important to understand who they have been helping and who has been referring cases to them. As the data is published in part for reasons of transparency, it is also important to critically engage with it to identify any potential “blind spots” or issues which emerge regarding the FMU's activity year-on-year.

Recommendations for the FMU, government, MPs and other sector stakeholders.

- Consistency is needed in how FMU statistics are collected, collated and presented. There should be no further changes in this for 2024 and future years.
- Consistency needs to be guaranteed between the FMU's written report on their data, and their published data tables. The 2023 data tables should be updated with accurate data.
- Although we should recognise that men are at risk of forced marriage as well as women, the FMU should analyse its data and speak to its stakeholders to understand why the gender split of cases to which it offered advice and support was so different in 2023.
- The FMU's statistics support some stereotypes around forced marriage (e.g. that it predominantly affects people from South Asian communities). Research is needed to better understand whether the high number of cases reported with a link to Pakistan, and/or from the West Midlands and North West (with large South Asian populations) are due to these stereotypes (meaning other cases are not being spotted, and helped).
- The FMU should engage with stakeholders to find out why there has been a drop in referrals from some stakeholder groups, and why there has been such an increase in referrals from within other areas of the Home Office itself (especially Borders and Immigration staff). This is particularly important as service providers and other stakeholders are reporting a loss of confidence in the FMU.ⁱⁱ

Background to FMU Statistics

The FMU was set up in 2005 “to support British nationals being forced into marriage overseas and to assist anyone in the UK, regardless of nationality, faced with the prospect of being forced into a marriage”.ⁱⁱⁱ It is a joint Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office unit, operating both inside and outside the UK. It operates a helpline and can also be contacted by email.

FM was made a civil offence in the UK in 2007 as part of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act^{iv}, and criminalised in 2014 as part of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act^v. The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022^{vi} changed the law about FM from 27 February 2023.

According to UK law, “a forced marriage is one where one or both people do not or cannot consent to the marriage and pressure or abuse is used to force them into the marriage.”^{vii} Since February 2023, in England and Wales, it is also “when anything is done to make someone marry before they turn 18, even if

there is no pressure or abuse”. In Scotland, people aged 16-18 can still marry, and in Northern Ireland they can marry so long as they have their parents' or guardians' consent.

The kind of pressure brought to bear on people to force them to marry may include: physical (e.g. threats, violence and/or sexual violence); emotional and psychological (e.g. making someone feel like they are bringing “shame” on their family); and/or financial (e.g. taking someone's wages).^{viii} FM is a recognised human rights abuse, and a form of both Honour-Based Abuse (HBA) and Domestic Abuse. In some jurisdictions, and by the International Labour Organization (ILO), it is also recognised as a form of modern slavery and/or human trafficking.

Data is collected on forced marriage by the FMU, by charities such as Karma Nirvana, who run the national helpline for victims of forced marriage and HBA, by the police, by the Crown Prosecution Service and by local authorities (e.g. by children's social services).^{ix} There is currently no estimate of the prevalence of forced marriage in the UK.^x (Globally, the ILO and Walk Free estimate that 22 million people were living in a forced marriage on any given day in 2021.^{xi}) Little of this data is publicly available^{xii}, making the FMU's annual statistics a vital source of information on forced marriage in the UK.

The FMU has regularly published statistics since 2012.^{xiii} In 2021, it radically changed how it counted cases, including in its statistics only “case[s] in which advice and support is given”, “where the FMU is provided with details of a specific individual at risk of, or affected by, forced marriage (or FGM), and actively provides advice and support for as long as required”.^{xiv} This made comparisons with previous data difficult.

This year, the FMU explained this change in some more detail, explaining that their official figure of “cases” are those in which the FMU gave active “advice and support”. However, they also receive a number of requests for “advice”, which this year have been classed as “forced marriage enquiries”, but were previously called “general enquiries.” Such enquiries are ones “where the FMU may be asked to provide general advice and/or signposting to other sources of guidance or information without requiring continuous action or support by the FMU, such as historic forced marriage ... how to apply for a Forced Marriage Protection Order ... immigration advice about foreign spouses and so on”.

The new term makes it clearer that these contacts (to either the helpline or the FMU's email address) may refer to cases of forced marriage and are not just general enquiries about, for instance, the availability of FMU training. However, it is not clear that *all* these enquiries are related to forced marriage (e.g. advice about a spouse's immigration status).

It is still not really possible to compare data from 2023 with data from before 2020. However, it is possible to compare it to data from 2021 and 2022, with the caveat that contacts labelled “general enquires” in those years *might* have referred to cases of FGM, not just forced marriage. This said, there are, in general, so few contacts about FGM, that this is unlikely to have had a significant impact on the data and its comparability.

Thus, there are now three years of data to compare, which makes some longer-term trends discernible. It is a shame that data from 2020 and earlier is not really comparable with current data, as the FMU is one of the few sources of year-on-year forced marriage data. It is to be hoped that there are no further changes in how FMU data is collected and presented.

General Findings from the 2023 FMU Statistics

Total Cases:

In 2023, the FMU handled 280 “advice and support” cases relating to forced marriage (and three to FGM), compared to 297 in 2022 (and five cases of FGM). (These are cases where “the FMU is provided with full details of a specific individual at risk of, or affected by, forced marriage”.^{xv}) This is a decrease of nearly 6% (17 cases). As the FMU note, this decrease “is unlikely to be indicative of a decrease in the prevalence of forced marriage in the UK” noting that FMU statistics “are not a good guide” for prevalence.^{xvi}

Given the change in the law which came into force in February 2023, we might have expected an increase in cases in this time period (as child marriages not previously necessarily counted as “forced” would now so count, and fall under the remit of the FMU). Similarly, given the substantial increase in forced marriage globally charted by the ILO and Walk Free between 2016 and 2021, we might also expect that cases would be increasing in the UK, as the causes pushing global growth have also been experienced here, and/or by people who might have connections to the UK (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic, increased costs of living and poverty, violence, and displacement). As Figure 1 shows, the decrease is smaller than the one from 2021 to 2022, when there was a particularly sharp decrease in forced marriage enquiries, as well as 40 fewer cases.

Because of a lack of prevalence data, it is impossible to know whether this decrease in cases handled by the FMU reflects a decrease in cases across the UK, or only a decrease in contact with the FMU. This, in turn, might reflect a decrease in cases of forced marriage which have an overseas element (which account for the majority of cases handled by the

FMU), though this does not mean there are fewer cases of FM in the UK overall. Alternatively, it might reflect a decrease in people’s willingness to engage with the FMU, or in their knowledge of the FMU and its role.

The FMU note that “[a]s a result of an extensive outreach programme being delivered by the FMU in recent years, the FMU have been requested to attend a greater number of strategy meetings organised by the safeguarding professionals. These have resulted in early intervention being made and safeguarding measures being put in place, such as forced marriage protection order being obtained or individuals being made subject to a child protection plan”.^{xvii} Assuming these safeguarding meetings do not count as cases to which the FMU gave “advice and support”, this may be one reason for a reduction in cases.

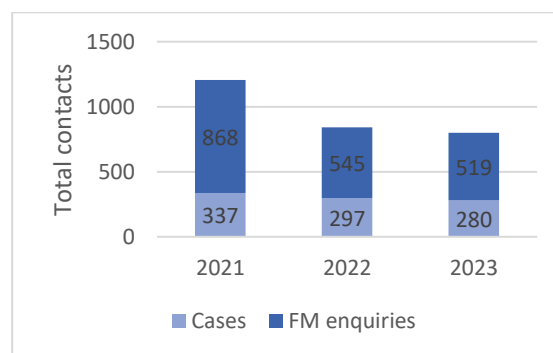


Figure 1: Total FMU contacts, 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Source: FMU Statistics)

Monthly Calls:

There is no clearly discernible pattern when we consider the months in which the FMU gives advice and support to forced marriage cases, apart from the fact that for the last three years there has been a significant percentage of cases in March.

Despite a prevailing idea that the risk of FM (especially with an overseas element) increases around the summer holidays, the FMU supports relatively few cases in July, August and September. There was something of a spike in June (12% of total annual calls), but a slightly larger one in March (13%) and a similar percentage in February (10%). The largest spike was in December (14%). This is very different to other years (when December had a very low number of cases).

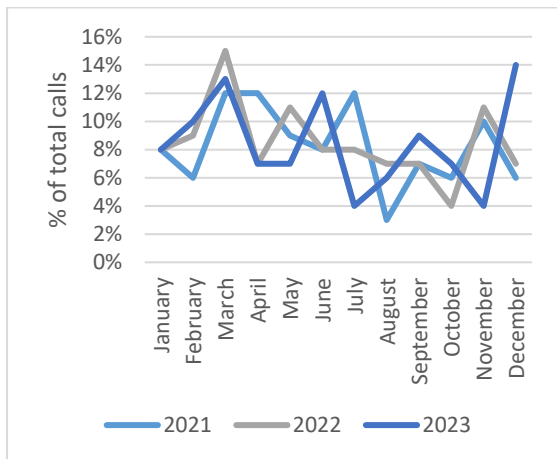


Figure 2: Monthly Calls to the FMU, 2021 and 2022 (Source: FMU Statistics)

This may be a sign that some stakeholders who do identify people at risk before the long school summer holidays contact agencies other than the FMU. For instance, education providers might refer a case to MARAC instead of contacting the FMU. Police forces are perhaps likely to deal with cases via their own resources (and Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs)) rather than reach out to the FMU for help. On the other hand, it might suggest that agencies, including UK Border Force, should be aware of people potentially being taken abroad for forced marriage in the Christmas and/or Easter holidays.

Interestingly, we did not see a significant increase in cases supported by the FMU leading up to the change in the law regarding child marriage, which happened on 27 February 2023 (see Table 1). This is despite reports to third sector organisations of planned marriages being brought forward before the new Act came into force. Instead, there was something of a spike (38 cases) in March.

November 2022	December 2022	January 2023	February 2023
33	20	23	27

Table 1: Cases handled by the FMU, November 2022-February 2023. Source: FMU Statistics.

Age of Victims

As in 2021 and 2022, over 50% of victims in “advice and support” cases for 2023 were aged 21 and under (see Figure 3). Unlike in other years, there was a fairly even spread of victims across all age categories, though it is also worth noting that these categories are not equal (i.e. “16-17” and “18-21” compared to “41+”).

Age	No. of cases
15 and under	33
16-17	37
18-21	51
22-25	44
26-30	42
31-40	48
41+	23
Unknown	5

Table 2: Age of victims in “advice and support cases”, 2023. (Source: FMU statistics).

A quarter of victims in FMU cases in 2023 were aged under 18, compared with 30% in 2022 and 25% in 2021. As Table 2 shows, this is 70 victims. It was 88 in 2022 and 118 in 2021.^{xviii}

This might reflect the change in the law. Perhaps, now that the age of marriage has been raised to 18, parents (at least in England and Wales) are not trying to get their children married (or betrothed) under this age, and the law is achieving one of its aims (though not wholly, as there are still cases involving people under the age of 18).

However, other third sector organisations have reported increases in cases of child marriage. For instance, Karma Nirvana recorded 173 cases being reported to their helpline in the 11 months to end January 2024.^{xix} This is a similar period to the FMU’s 2023 statistics (i.e. February 2023-January 2024 compared to January 2023 to December 2023), and more than twice the number of cases given advice and support by the FMU. This makes the relatively low number of FMU cases involving people aged 17 and under quite surprising, again raising concerns that people at risk and/or aware of people at risk are not reaching out to the FMU for help.

It would be interesting to know the age break-down of cases which were mentioned in forced marriage enquiries made to the FMU, in case this age range was highly represented there, but the cases that these enquiries related to were handled by other bodies, e.g. the police and/or social services.

This said, Karma Nirvana reported that many safeguarding professionals do not know about the change in the law, and that a no professionals contacting them about a child “at risk” reported having had any training on the new law.^{xx} Given this, professionals might not be referring cases to the FMU as they do not know that these child marriages count as forced marriages, and fall within the FMU’s remit.

More worryingly, safeguarding professionals who responded to Karma Nirvana’s work to understand the impact of the new child marriage law said that they had lost confidence in FMU assistance.^{xxi} This suggests they would not turn to it for help in these cases. (This included police and people working in social care.) They also reported receiving inaccurate information from the FMU’s helpline on the new child marriage law, which again might explain the low

number of cases compared to those reported to Karma Nirvana, though it cannot – in itself – account for the decrease in cases from before the law changed.^{xxii}

As Figure 3 also shows, 18% of FMU “advice and support” cases involved people aged 18-21 (a drop from 26% in 2022, and the same proportion as in 2021). As Table 2 highlights, this was the age-range with the highest number of cases in 2023. (Though it was lower than the total for under-15s and 16–17-year-olds combined.) This reveals the need for stakeholders to be aware of the risks facing people from this age group (for instance, higher education providers, employers, and colleagues). These risks will not be picked up by children’s social services, or schools.

Moreover, even where people may have been deemed at risk at a younger age it is not clear whether data-sharing between agencies (e.g. local authorities and police services) would allow for those at risk to be adequately protected once they achieve adulthood. This is of particular concern with the change in the law regarding the age of marriage in 2023: people who might have been forced to marry aged 16-17 before the change to the law may be particularly at risk as they turn 18.

A slightly higher percentage of cases concerned 22-25 year-olds in 2023 than 2022, though a similar percentage to 2021. This reflects 44 people in 2023 (see Table 2), 40 in 2022, and 58 people in 2021.^{xxiii}

The same proportion of cases in 2023 and 2022 related to people aged 26-30: this was a higher proportion than in 2021, and also more actual cases (42 in 2023; 46 in 2022; 31 in 2021^{xxiv}).

The 22-25 age-range included the median figure for 2023. In 2022 and 2021, the median case fell in the 18-21 age range.^{xxv} This is an interesting shift. It reflects not only that forced marriage can affect people of any age in the UK, but may also reflect a trend that forced marriages are affecting older people (at least than is usually supposed, and perhaps than used to be the case).

Relatedly, as Figure 3 also shows, there was a higher proportion of cases involving people aged 31-40 than in previous comparable years. This was 48 people in 2023 – the second-highest number in any given age group, and the third-highest number if we group all under-18s together (see Table 2).

In 2021, there were 43 cases in this age-range, and in 2022, only 24.^{xxvi} Probably the number of cases are too low to really discern underlying causal trends, but it remains the case that we should not only see forced marriage as an issue which affects young(er) people. (Similarly, 13 cases related to people aged 41+.) It would be interesting to know if there is a significant difference in gender at different ages, especially given the issue of forced marriages involving men who lack the mental capacity to consent to marriage, but the FMU does not provide this information.

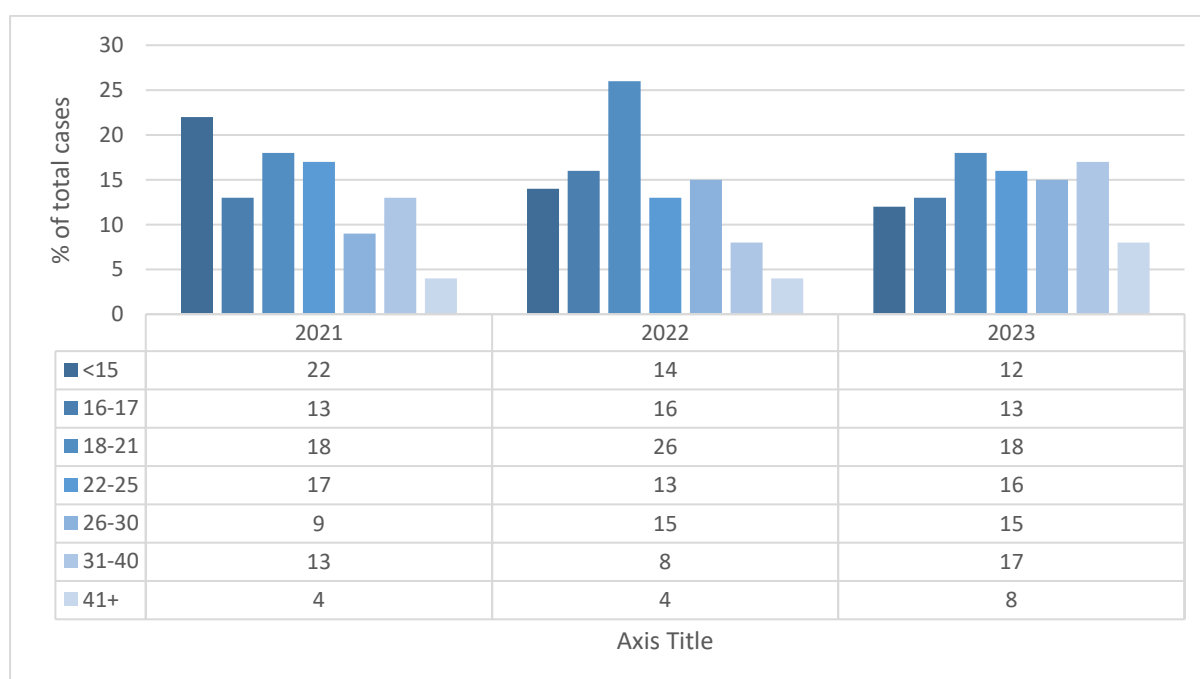


Figure 3 - Age of victims in cases handled the FMU 2021-2023 (Source: FMU Statistics). Percentage of total cases.

Sex of Victims

As in other years, the majority of victims in cases where the FMU offered “advice and support” were female (69% of cases). This is a significant decrease from 2022 (when 78% of victims were female) and 2021 (when 74% of victims were female).

Across the globe, FM is a very gendered issue (one reason why FM is often considered a form of violence against women and girls, and the Sustainable Development Goal of ending child, early and forced marriage is part of Goal 5, “Gender Equality”).

On the one hand, that 31% of cases offered advice and support by the FMU involved male victims highlights that FM does not *just* affect men. Past data from the FMU has shown that victims of FM involving people who lack the mental capacity to consent are more likely to be male, and 23% of cases given advice and support by the FMU were of this nature. (Though this, in itself, does not explain the relatively high percentage of cases involving male victims.)

On the other hand, a decrease in the number of female victims in cases handled by the FMU may also signal that these cases are not being identified by stakeholders likely to refer a case to the FMU and/or a decrease in willingness to make contact with the FMU by female victims. Or that, for some reason, the FMU is more likely to give advice and support in a case involving a male victim than a female one, even though, overall, receiving fewer contacts about male victims (and even though what data we have on prevalence would suggest there are significantly fewer male victims than female ones). If that is the case, it would be interesting to understand why.

Although the figures from before the Covid-19 pandemic are not directly comparable with more recent statistics (because “cases” did not used to be separated from “general enquiries”, and demographic data is only given for “cases” in recent statistics), on average between 2010 and 2019, 80% of victims were female. It would be interesting to know the gender split of forced marriage enquiries, but this data is not published by the FMU.

Sexual Orientation of Victims

Only 2 victims (0.7% of the total) identified as being LGBT^{xxvii} in 2023. This is a decrease from previous years (1.7% in 2022, and 2% in 2021), and is almost certainly a dramatic under-representation both of the victims who did approach the FMU and of victims of

FM more generally. There are many reasons why people at risk of FM might not want to report their sexuality to the FMU (or anyone). But this declining trend is somewhat concerning if it signals to a lack of confidence in the LGBTQIA+ community in contacting the FMU.

Nationality of Victims

Since 2020, the FMU has given some basic details about the nationality of victims – that is, were they a British national (or dual-national), a non-British national, or is their nationality unknown.

There are some issues with the figures for nationality (and marriage status, discussed below) for 2023, as the data tables do not match the written report. As Figure 4 shows, the data tables report 212 cases involving a British National, but the figures given for a break-down of this number depending on marriage status add up to 283. The data table also records 64 non-British nationals (and no “unknowns”) giving a total of 276 cases, whereas the FMU also reported 283 cases in total. If we add all the figures in the breakdown by marriage status, the total number of cases is 342, which is in excess of the number of cases the FMU says it gave “advice and support” to in 2023.^{xxviii} Some of these statistics, then, may refer to “forced marriage enquiries”, and/or may not be accurate. It would be good to get some clarity from the FMU about these statistics. Given these issues, the following analysis must be taken with something of a pinch of salt, as the underlying data is not reliable.

In the written report that the data tables accompany, 212 cases are recorded of British nationals; 46 of non-British nationals (excluding EU nationals); 18 cases of EU nationals; and 7 cases where the nationality was unknown.^{xxix} This does give a total of 283. This data is shown in Figure 5. To make it comparable to previous years, non-British nationals and EU nationals have been grouped together. We can see that 75% of victims were British nationals (including dual nationals). This is almost exactly the same as in 2022 (74%) and 2021 (76%).^{xxx}

However, as a proportion of the total number of cases given in the data tables, only 64% of cases to which the FMU gave “advice and support” in 2023 concerned UK nationals, which is quite a significant change to 2021 and 2022.

Table 4: Number of cases in which the Forced Marriage Unit gave advice or support, by nationality, 2023

This worksheet contains one table

Some shorthand is used in this table; [x] indicates that the number of cases was fewer than 5

Source: Forced Marriage Unit, Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

		Number of cases	Percentage of cases
British national (including dual national)	Total	212	75%
British national (including dual national)	UK Pre [Note 3]	115	41%
British national (including dual national)	UK Post [Note 3]	125	44%
British national (including dual national)	UK Unknown	0	0%
British national (including dual national)	Overseas Pre [Note 3]	28	10%
British national (including dual national)	Overseas Post [Note 3]	11	4%
British national (including dual national)	Overseas Unknown	4	1%
Non-British national (Including EU national)	Total	64	33%
Non-British national (Including EU national)	UK Pre	37	58%
Non-British national	UK Post	22	34%
Non-British national	UK Unknown	[x]	[x]
Non-British national	Overseas Pre	[x]	[x]
Non-British national	Overseas Post	[x]	[x]
Non-British national	Overseas Unknown	[x]	[x]
Non-British national	Unknown	[x]	[x]
Total number of cases		283	

Figure 4: FMU Data table for Nationality 2023 (Source: FMU Statistics).

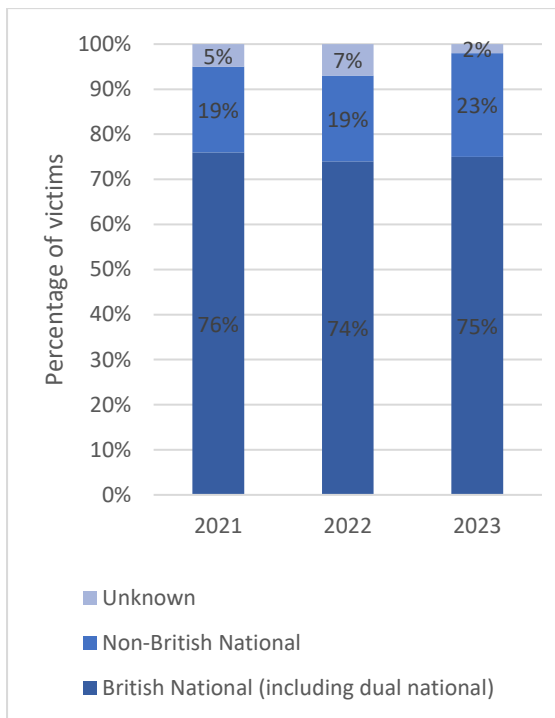


Figure 5 Nationality of Victims (Source: FMU Statistics^{xxxv})

Whichever percentage is correct, we can still see that a very high percentage of the FMU’s cases involve British nationals (including dual nationals) year-on-year. This is helpful in highlighting that many British nationals are at risk of forced marriage (it is not just an issue which occurs overseas, and/or which involves someone from overseas being forced to marry someone in the UK), but there is also a concern that (as we have no clear prevalence data) non-British nationals at risk may not be being spotted by stakeholders, and/or are not turning to the FMU for help. The FMU are not the only agency competent to support and advise victims, but in some cases (e.g. where there is a need to help someone abroad) they may well be the best-placed.

Year-on-year (as we cannot compare data on EU versus other non-UK nationals) the only discernible

change is in the number of “unknowns”. It is interesting that this information is unknown in some “advice and support cases” (rather than forced marriage enquiries), as we might imagine it is information the FMU would want and/or need to give advice and support.

Marriage Status

As part of its data on nationality, the FMU records the status of the forced marriages in cases to which it gives advice and support – i.e. has the forced marriage yet happened, or is contact made before this can occur? They also record whether the victim was the UK national, or a non-UK national, and also whether they were in the UK (or overseas) at the time the FMU gave advice and support. Figure 5 shows the numbers for 2023.

As noted above, there are significant issues with this data for 2023 (see Figure 4). Again, given these issues, the following analysis must be taken cautiously, as the underlying data is not necessarily reliable.

As Figure 6 shows, 41% (115) of cases involved a UK national who was in the UK and contact was made with the FMU before the forced marriage had taken place, while a slightly higher percentage (44%) of UK nationals were in the UK, but contact was only made after the forced marriage had occurred.

A much smaller proportion of cases involved UK-nationals who were already abroad (14% in total). Of those 43 cases, 28 (65% of these cases, 10% of all cases) involved forced marriages which had not yet taken place, while 11 (4% of all cases) involved forced marriages which had already taken place. Overall, then, in 51% of cases, the FMU was involved before a forced marriage took place (for UK nationals), while in 48% of cases, the forced marriage had already taken place. In the remaining cases, the “status” of the marriage is unknown. (In

the written report on the statistics, the FMU say that 51% of *all* cases were referred to the FMU prior to the forced marriage taking place, not just those of British-Nationals.^{xxxii})

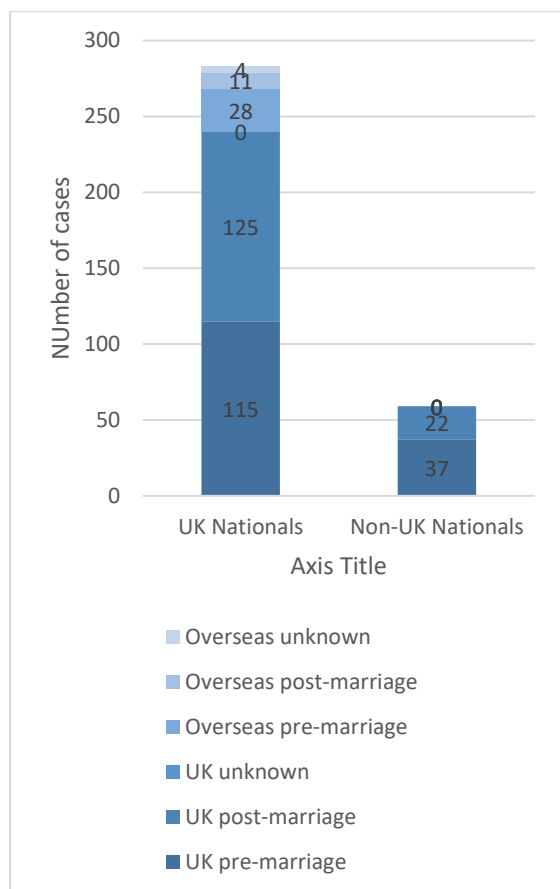


Figure 6: Status of marriage, 2023 FMU cases (Source: FMU statistics).

For cases where the victim was not a UK national (or dual national), as Figure 6 also shows, in 58% of cases (37), the victim was in the UK and the forced marriage had not taken place, whereas in 34% of cases (22), they were in the UK and the forced marriage had taken place. (But note the issue, mentioned above, about this data.)

This data suggests that the FMU mainly handles cases where victims are in the UK, even if the marriage has taken place overseas. The FMU notes that cases where the forced marriage has already taken place are highlighted to them by “Borders and Immigration staff or local authorities” and “generally” concern reluctant sponsors or mental capacity concerns. These issues are quite different, and it seems likely that Borders and Immigration staff are more likely to come across reluctant sponsors and local authorities (with a responsibility for adult social care) to highlight concerns about mental capacity issues. A question remains about the training given the Borders and Immigrations staff to spot and support forced marriage cases including reluctant sponsors. (Where, when and how, do they identify

potential cases involving reluctant sponsors, and how do they help victims?)

There are also questions about general awareness and training, given how many forced marriages have already taken place before they come to the attention of the FMU. Moreover, there are questions about what happens after the FMU has been involved: there were not, for instance, 136 prosecutions for forced marriage in the UK in 2023. This is an issue which applies to more organisations than the FMU (not least, the police and CPS).

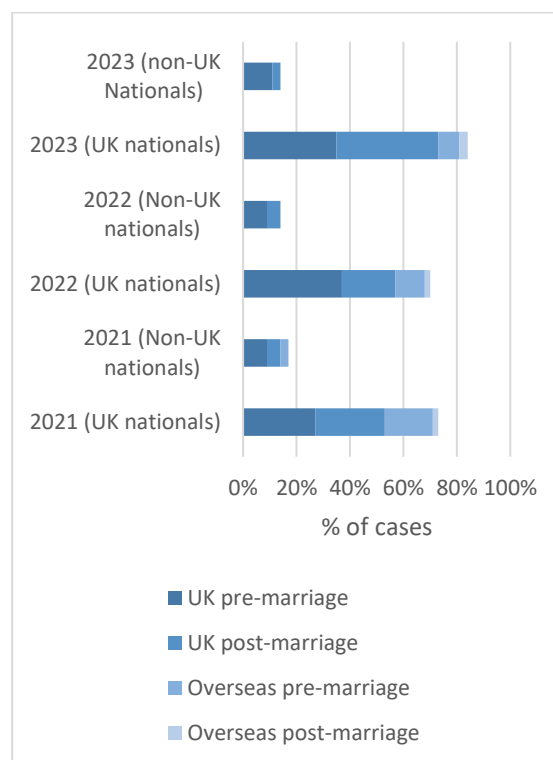


Figure 7: Marriage status in cases handled by the FMU 2021-2023 for UK and non-UK nationals. (Source: FMU statistics).

In 2023, as Figure 7 shows, there was a very similar split between cases involving forced marriages which had, and which had not yet, taken place for non-UK nationals as there was for other years. However, a larger proportion of cases involving UK nationals came to the attention of the FMU after the forced marriage had taken place in 2023 (38%) than in 2022 (20%) and 2021 (26%). In terms of case numbers, rather than percentages, this was 125 cases in 2023, 61 in 2022 and 86 in 2021. That is, a much larger number of cases were referred to the FMU only after the forced marriage had happened, despite the overall number of cases falling (a 20% decrease in total cases since 2021).

As the FMU’s case numbers reflect an unknown proportion of total cases, this change may only reflect better training and awareness among people who are able to identify victims of forced marriage after the marriage has happened, and/or more confidence on their part to contact the FMU about such cases.

That is, it may not be the case that fewer cases of forced marriage are being identified before they occur, but this is still something of a concerning statistic.

Perhaps more positively, there has been a decrease since 2021 in the number of cases being referred to the FMU where a UK-national (or dual national) is already overseas. This was 22% of cases in 2021 (73 cases); 16% in 2022 (49 cases) and 12% in 2023 (43 cases). On the other hand, this may not reflect fewer people being taken abroad for a forced marriage, but simply less of an ability on the part of those victims to contact the FMU, or willingness/confidence on the part of other stakeholders working to help such victims.

Location of Victims

As Figure 8 shows, most cases in 2023 involved victims living in London (22%) or the West Midlands (21%). The North West accounted for a further 16%. Together, then, these three regions were home to nearly 60% of victims in cases for which the FMU gave advice and support.

This confirms the data from 2022, where for the first time the West Midlands account for the second-highest number of cases (after London), and a general decline in cases from the North West (which dropped to third-highest number of cases in 2022 and 2023).

A significant number of cases also came from Yorkshire and the Humber; the East; the South-East; and the East Midlands. Together, these regions accounted for nearly 30% of cases to which the FMU gave advice and support in 2023.

As we have no data about the actual prevalence of FM in the UK, however, this does necessarily not mean that people living in these regions are more at risk than people in, say, Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. Instead, all we can say for sure is that stakeholders from these regions (including victims) receive advice and support from the FMU more than those from other regions. (It would be interesting to know if there is also geographical data available on where forced marriage enquiries come from, which might flesh out this data.)

Interestingly, the most populous region of the UK according to the most recent census (2021) was the South-East, with 9.28 million people, making 15.6% of the total population of England and Wales. However, it only account for 7% of cases given advice and support by the FMU in 2021 and 2022, and 8% in 2023. (This percentage remains the same even if we adjust the figures to take out the maximum possible cases from Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2023, which is 11). As Table 3 shows, there were 0.2 cases per 100,000 people (or 2 cases per 1

million people) in the South East in 2023, compared to 0.7 for every 100,000 people in London, the second most populous area of the UK. It is not simply, then, that more populous areas see more cases or make more contacts with the FMU.

	Total Cases	Cases per 100,000 people
London	62	0.7
West Midlands	59	1
North West	44	0.6
Yorkshire and the Humber	26	0.5
South East	22	0.2

Table 3 – 2023 FMU cases as proportion of population, based on 2021 census (Source: FMU Statistics and OFS census data).

Table 3 shows the number of FMU advice and support cases per region as a percentage of the total population in that region according to the 2021 census data (for those regions with a significant number of FMU cases in 2023). It is striking that cases from the West Midlands represent a higher proportion of the population of that region (1 in every 100,000) than do cases for London (0.7 per 100,000), though London has more cases, representing a higher percentage of FMU cases in 2023.

The West Midlands also has a higher number of cases per 100,000 people than any other region. Similarly, the proportion of cases from the North West as a proportion of its total population (0.6 per 100,000) is close to that of London, despite the North West being a significantly smaller region, and accounting for fewer cases overall. The proportion of cases from Yorkshire and the Humber relative to its population, too, is higher than for the South East, despite the actual number of cases being similar and the Yorkshire and the Humber region being much smaller.

Of course, these are tiny fractions of the total population of any of these regions. And this analysis cannot tell us about actual risk or prevalence, because we do not know what proportion of actual cases of forced marriage are offered advice and support by the FMU (as we have no underlying prevalence data). However, it does show that some regions account for proportionally more calls to the FMU (compared to their population) than other regions responsible for high volumes of calls, which ought to be borne in mind when considering FMU data. Further information from the census, and from stakeholders in these regions, might reveal factors which account for the high volume of calls from these regions (e.g. ethnicity and other demographic data, and socio-economic data including on income and/or deprivation).^{xxiii}

Fewer than five cases were reported from the North East, Northern Ireland and Wales in 2023. For safeguarding reasons, the FMU do not give any more precise information than “<5”. They do not

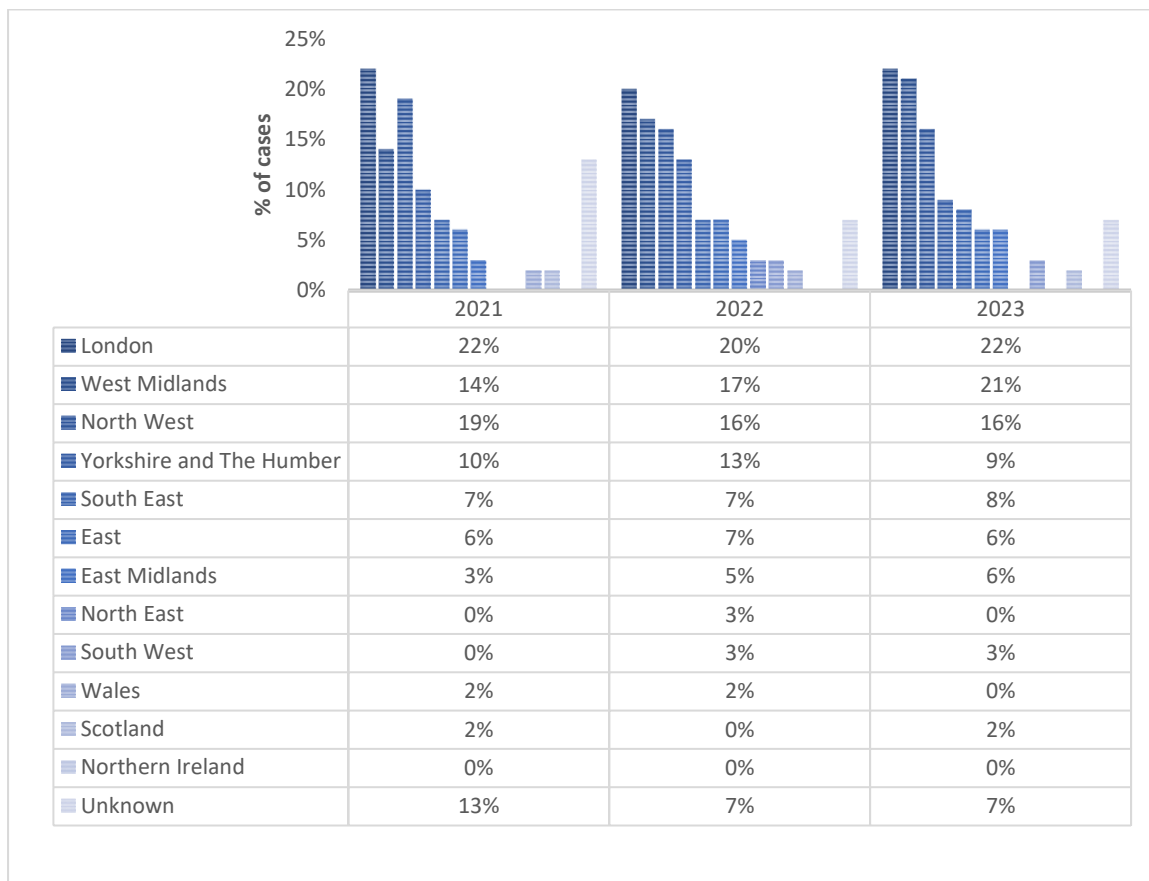


Figure 8 - Location of Victims 2021-2023 (Source: FMU Statistics)

provide percentages, only “[x]”, which, for ease, I have transcribed as 0% in Figure 8. These figures reflect the fact that these regions generally account for few cases to which the FMU give advice and support year-on-year. Again, this does not mean that forced marriage is not an issue in these regions, but only that stakeholders in these regions (including victims) are not as likely to contact the FMU as stakeholders in other regions.

The only notable difference is the increasing number of cases being reported in the East Midlands. It is also interesting to see that even in cases where the FMU has given “advice and support” it does not have any data on the location of the victim. On this, we should also note that the victim’s location might not represent where their forced marriage happened, or was planned to happen, if they have already fled from that dangerous situation to one of greater safety.

Focus Country

The FMU defines a “focus country” as “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 where the spouse is currently residing”.^{xxiv} As Figure 9 shows, in 2021, 11 cases had the UK as the “focus country”: in 2022, this was 8; and in 2023, 10. In both 2021 and 2022, this amounted to 3% of cases, in 2023 it was 4%.

In 2023, the FMU gave advice and support in cases associated with 31 different “focus countries”: in 2021, this was 33 different countries, and in 2022, 25. As in other years, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and India were associated with a significant number of cases, with Pakistan being the “focus country” in almost 50% of cases in both 2021, 2022 and 2023.

We should be wary, though, of thinking this shows that FM is a peculiarly “Pakistani”, South Asian or Muslim problem. All it shows is that almost 50% of cases handled by the FMU have Pakistan as a “focus country” – we do not know what proportion of total cases this represents, or whether there might be reasons for the high representation of cases with Pakistan as the “focus country” in this data, for instance, specific outreach and training with Pakistani communities by the FMU, or a bias among stakeholders towards thinking forced marriage is specially associated with Pakistan (and communities with Pakistani heritage) which means people at risk in these communities are spotted (and helped) more frequently than in other communities. Interestingly, in 2023, Turkey accounted for 2% of cases – it was last listed as a focus country in 2020, where it was associated with 1% of cases.

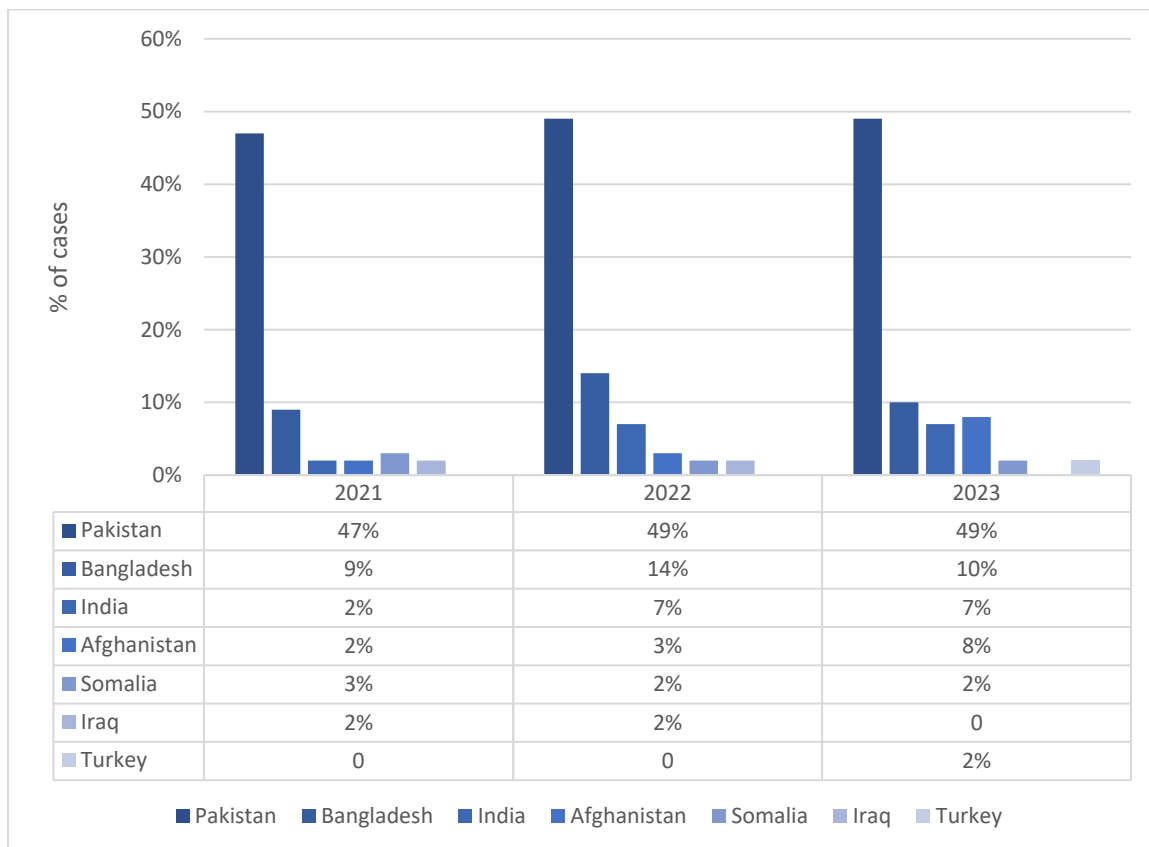


Figure 9- Focus Countries 2021-2023 (Source: FMU Statistics)

Somalia has also regularly featured as a “focus country” since the FMU’s records began.^{xxxv} In this context, it may be worth noting that these figures also contain cases of FGM to which the FMU has offered advice and support. Somalia has the highest recorded cases of FGM in the world, with 98% of girls between the ages of 5 and 11 having undergone infibulation.^{xxxvi} This is not to say with certainty that the cases of FGM the FMU handled in 2023 were associated with Somalia, but only to offer some reason for why Somalia might appear so regularly in FMU statistics as a “focus country”, given the FMU’s responsibility not only for forced marriage, but cases of FGM happening overseas.

Source of Referrals

A relatively small number of referrals come to the FMU from victims themselves, as Figure 10 shows. In 2023, this was 29 cases in which advice and support was given; in 2022, 37 cases and in 2021, 56 (representing 10%, 12% and 17% of cases respectively). This is a significant drop over the last three years (almost half, in terms of cases and the proportion that represents of the whole). This might suggest that victims are less willing to reach out to the FMU themselves, and/or that they are less aware of the FMU and how it might be able to help them. It could also suggest that victims are being prevented from reaching out to the FMU by perpetrators, though this is perhaps less plausible as a reason than it was in the pandemic. (Although cases and enquiries were grouped together in 2020, 21% of contacts with the FMU came from victims themselves, which was a

higher proportion than in 2019 (18%), although there were significantly fewer cases in 2020 than 2019.)

2023 saw a decline in referrals from friends and colleagues, continuing a trend seen in 2022. Again, this may be a sign that fewer people are aware of the work of the FMU. Family accounted for a similar percentage of cases as in 2022, a slightly smaller proportion than in 2021. In the main, though referrals come to the FMU from professionals rather than private individuals: 78% in 2023 (compared with 76% in 2022 and 69% in 2021).

It is notable how many referrals come from within the Home Office “generally borders and immigration” – over a third in 2023, compared to about a sixth in 2022 and about a fifth in 2023.^{xxxvii} This is a significant increase from other years. It would be interesting to know if this was the result of a deliberate policy on the part of the Home Office and/or FMU, and/or related to training provided to colleagues in the Home Office by the FMU.

In 2021 and 2022 nearly a quarter of referrals came from social services: in 2023, this fell to a fifth. It would be interesting to know what the split is between children’s and adult social services, as these might represent quite different types of forced marriage case.

Despite the police having their own powers to tackle forced marriage, it is interesting that 11% of referrals came from this source in 2023 (compared to 15% in 2022 and 9% in 2021). It would be interesting to

understand more about the relationship between the FMU and police, and why police make referrals, but these may refer to cases which have an overseas element, where the police would not have jurisdiction, and might need the support of British embassies overseas.

Education accounts for a quite small percentage of referrals to the FMU – 6% in 2023 compared to 9% in 2022 and 3% in 2021. This may be one reason why there is no strong correlation between school holidays and calls to the FMU helpline about “advice and support” cases (though other stakeholders might be aware of young people at risk of being taken abroad in the school holidays). A question for further research is where schools and other education providers *do* turn for help (as it seems unlikely that *only* 9% of *all* cases of forced marriage in the UK are spotted, and victims supported, by education providers). Perhaps education providers are bringing cases (via social services or other child protection officers) to their local multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) instead, or turning directly to

the police. It is notable that in 2023 there were no referrals from NGOs. This may reflect the issues discussed above, and the loss of faith in the FMU from NGOs and other stakeholders in the sector.

Repatriations

The FMU helped advise or support the repatriation of 8 individuals in 2023.^{xxxviii} This is a similar number to 2022 and 2021.

The FMU notes that this figure does not include cases where an FMPO was used to facilitate direct repatriation without help from the FMU; where victims did not require assistance from the FCDO to return to the UK; and/or where the victim was not a British national, and this was not eligible for consular assistance from the UK. They emphasise that repatriation is not “fully representative of the assistance provided to forced marriage victims overseas”, which might also involve safeguarding advice or other advice and support via direct contact with a victim.

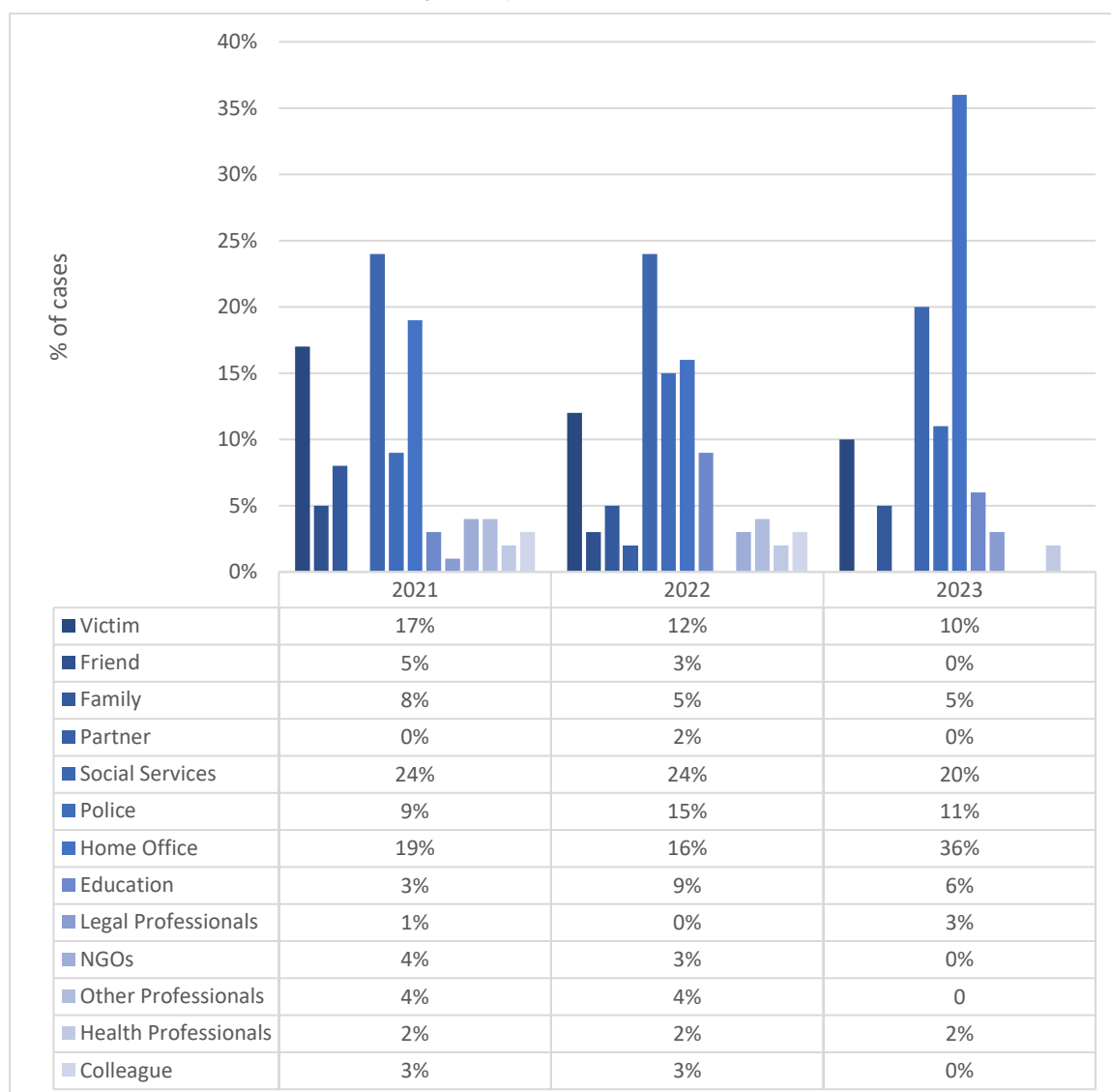


Figure 10: Source of Referrals to the FMU (Source: FMU Statistics)

Findings Regarding Cases with Mental Capacity Concerns

Cases involving victims who lack the mental capacity to consent (in line with the Mental Capacity Act 2005) are a specific subset of forced marriage cases. In 2021 and 2022, the relevant data table was labelled “cases involving someone with a learning disability”, as these are the main cause of mental capacity concerns for forced marriage cases (though they may not be the only ones).

In these cases, victims are more likely to be men (63% of cases in 2023^{xxxix}, 52% of cases in 2022, 57% in 2021), and, as Figure 11 shows, victims are likely to be older than victims where there is not a concern about mental capacity to consent. (This said, victims with disabilities do not account for all older victims – e.g. in 2023 there were 23 victims in total aged over 41, 8 of whom were victims with disabilities.)

Cases involving victims with a disability accounted for 24% of all cases in 2023 (67 individuals). This is a significant increase on 2021, where there were 53 victims (which accounted for 16% of cases) and a slight increase on 2022, where there were 62 individual victims, accounting for 21% of all cases. Again, this is against a backdrop in a decline in cases. This may suggest that this issue is becoming more of a problem in the UK (perhaps related to wider issues around an aging population). On the other hand, it may only show that the FMU and stakeholders who often reach out to them for advice and support and more aware of this issue, and thus picking up on it more frequently.

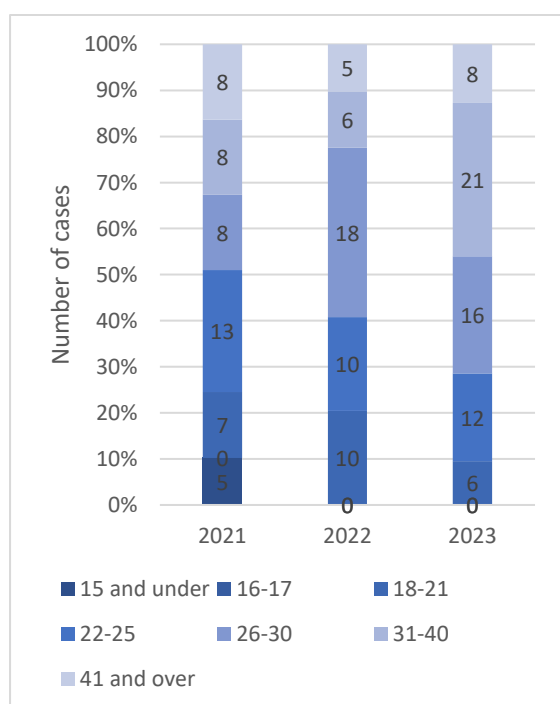


Figure 11 – Age of victims with disabilities, 2021-2023 (Source: FMU Statistics).

Age of Victims

In 2023, there were fewer than 5 cases involving children. The vast majority, then, involved adults. This has been true since at least 2021, but it is noteworthy that in 2021 there were 5 cases involving children aged 15 or under, and fewer than 5 cases involving children aged 16-17, while in 2022 there were fewer than five cases in both those age ranges, but in 2023 there were definitely zero cases involving children aged 15 or under.

This could, again, be a sign of the impact of the change of the law regarding the legal age of marriage in England and Wales. It may also be a feature of these specific kinds of marriage.

As Figure 11 shows, the clearest difference in 2023 was that 31% of cases (21 cases) involved a victim aged 31-40, whereas in 2022 this was only 10% of cases (6 cases) and in 2021 it was 15% of cases (8 cases). Again, this is a sign that this issue affects older victims, and highlights the different forms of forced marriage which are experienced in the UK, with different underlying causal factors and predictors of risk.

Location of Victims

Numbers for cases were only provided for four regions in 2023, though victims must have come from other regions (represented in the data by “[x]”, meaning there were fewer than 5 cases) – no region is reported as having zero cases of this kind.

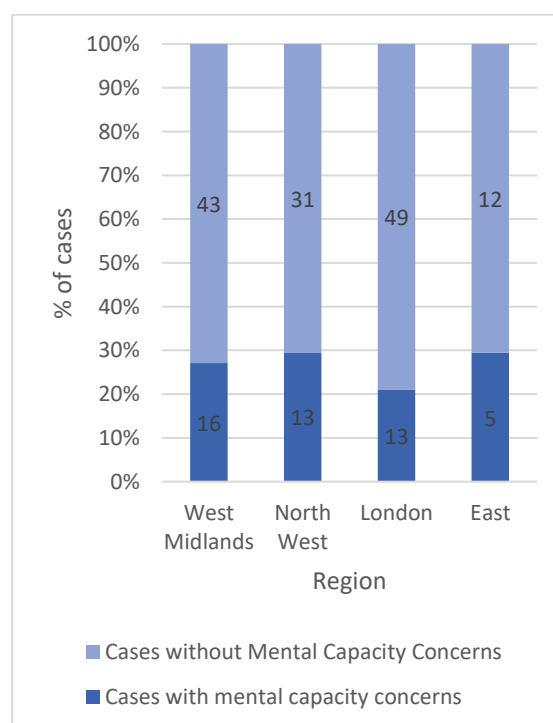


Figure 12 – Mental capacity cases as a proportion of all cases for four regions with highest number of such cases 2023 (Source: FMU statistics).

As Figure 22 shows, in 2021 and 2022, more than five cases were recorded in the West Midlands, the North West, London and Yorkshire and the Humber, which were (as noted above) the regions accounting for most cases of forced marriage overall. In 2023,

there were fewer than five cases in Yorkshire and the Humber, but 5 recorded in the East. Figure 12 shows these as a proportion of all cases.

Almost a third of cases in the North West were cases where there were mental capacity concerns, which is quite striking. In 2022 there were 11 such cases in the North West out of 49 cases in total (i.e. 27%). This is an increase, then, not only in total cases of this kind (13 compared to 11), but more significantly as a proportion of cases.

Similarly, the East accounted for 6% of all cases in 2023 (17 cases in total), and 7.5% of cases with mental capacity concerns (5 cases). Almost a third of cases in the East were therefore cases where there were mental capacity concerns. Although it is not possible to compare this with previous years (because of a lack of data) at a maximum, 21% of cases in the East in 2022 and 2021 (i.e. up to 4 cases) involved victims about whom there were mental capacity concerns. 2023, then, saw a significant increase, at least proportionately, though it is worth noting that the numbers involved are very small.

It is also striking that a higher percentage of cases in the West Midlands (27%) involve mental capacity concerns than in London (21%). London accounted for 22% of cases in 2023, but 19% of cases with mental capacity concerns. In comparison, the West Midlands accounted for 21% of all cases in 2023, but 24% of cases with mental capacity concerns. This may suggest that cases with victims about whom there are mental capacity concerns are more prevalent in the West Midlands and North West than other regions. On the other hand, it may only suggest that stakeholder in those regions are more likely to reach out to the FMU about such cases when they arise.

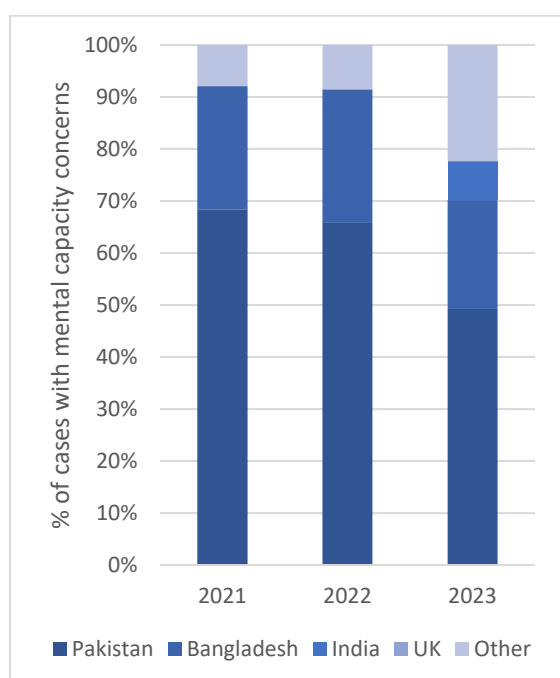


Figure 13 – Focus Countries for cases with mental capacity concerns, 2021-2023. (Source: FMU Data.)

Focus Country

As in 2021 and 2022, Pakistan was the most common focus country for these cases in 2023 (as Figure 13 shows), accounting for 49% of cases (in 2021 this was also 49%, and in 2020, 50%). This represents a slowly rising number of cases – from 26 in 2021 to 33 in 2023.

Bangladesh was the second focus country in all three years (with 21% of cases having it as the focus country in 2023, 19% in 2022 and 17% in 2021). This also represents a rising number of cases, from 9 in 2021 to 14 in 2023.

Interestingly, India had not been associated with any of these cases since 2020, but accounted for 5 cases (7%) in 2023. It is notable, and to be expected, that the three countries which account for most forced marriage cases in general handled by the FMU would account for most of these specific cases.

What is interesting, however, is that in 2023 there were 12 “focus” countries for these cases, compared to 7 in 2021 and 2022. This may point to better record-keeping and/or data-collection by the FMU, because in 2021 there were 11 cases (21%) relating to an “unknown” focus country, and the same number (making 18% of cases) in 2022, but fewer than 5 in 2023. As with all types of forced marriage, the forced marriage of people about whom there are mental capacity concerns does not *only* affect people with connections to Pakistan, Bangladesh and/or India.

Overall, the forced marriage of people who lack of the capacity to consent is evidently an issue in the UK, with at least 67 people at risk in 2023. It is good that this issue is recognised in forced marriage law, but specialised training may be needed to ensure proper safeguarding of people at risk. This may be happening, and be a caused of increasing numbers year-on-year: conversely, those increasing number may be a sign that this issue is not understood well enough across the sector.

Specific Findings about some “Focus Countries”

The FMU also gives more in-depth information about some of the more common focus countries. Here I look at what the data from 2023 tells us about each.

Pakistan

138 cases had Pakistan as the focus country in 2023, a decrease from 147 in 2022 (and 159 in 2021). This decrease is in line with the general decrease in numbers, with Pakistan the focus country of 49% of cases in 2023, 49% in 2022 and 47% in 2021).

Figure 14 shows the ages of victims in cases for which Pakistan was the focus country in 2021, 2022 and 2023. What is notable in 2023 is the significant increase in cases involving children aged 15 or under (45 cases in 2023, compared to 19 in 2022 and 29 in 2021). (There were 47 cases recorded involving children in the same age range in 2020, but it is not clear how comparable these figures are with data for 2023 (as discussed above).) Indeed, in 2023 45% of cases where Pakistan was the focus country involved children, while fewer than 5 cases involved people aged 41 and over.

In 2022 and 2023 we see a move away from the age profile of 2021, which had a fairly even spread across age ranges (although it is worth noting that the age ranges are not themselves equal). This was even more skewed towards younger victims in 2023.

This may show an increasing risk of child marriage for people with a link to Pakistan (or for whom Pakistan would be the focus country for some other reason). On the other hand, the stereotypical view of someone at risk of forced marriage is a young person (usually a girl) of Pakistani heritage, and there is a concern that these statistics only reflect that

widespread stereotype, which means people who fit this description are more likely to be spotted if they are at risk.

As with cases more generally, there were more female victims than male (65% compared with 35%) – see Figure 15. This is in line with the data from 2021 (65%/35%), though 2022 was more in line with the overall gendered split (76%/24%).

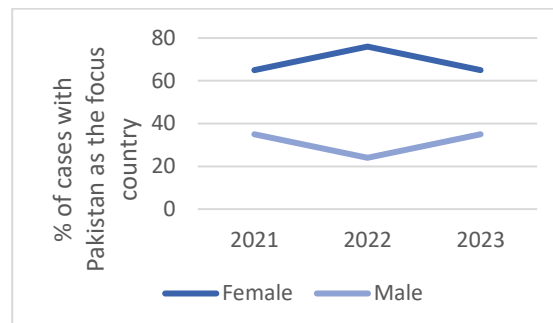


Figure 15 – Gender of victims where Pakistan is the focus country 2021-2023. (Source: FMU Statistics).

Victims were reported in the statistics as being from eleven regions in 2023. Figure 16 shows the data from the regions with the most victims.

The region with the most victims in 2023 was the West Midlands (37 cases – 21%). This figure has been increasing since 2021, where 18% of cases (29 victims) were recorded. In 2022 this was 21% of cases (31 victims). Thus, despite an overall decrease in cases, cases in the West Midlands have increased both in real terms, and as a proportion of all cases where Pakistan is the focus country. We might expect more cases where Pakistan is the focus country in the West Midlands than, say, the South West because of the demographics of these regions, but it is still noteworthy that so many cases are related to the West Midlands, and that this is increasing year-on-year.

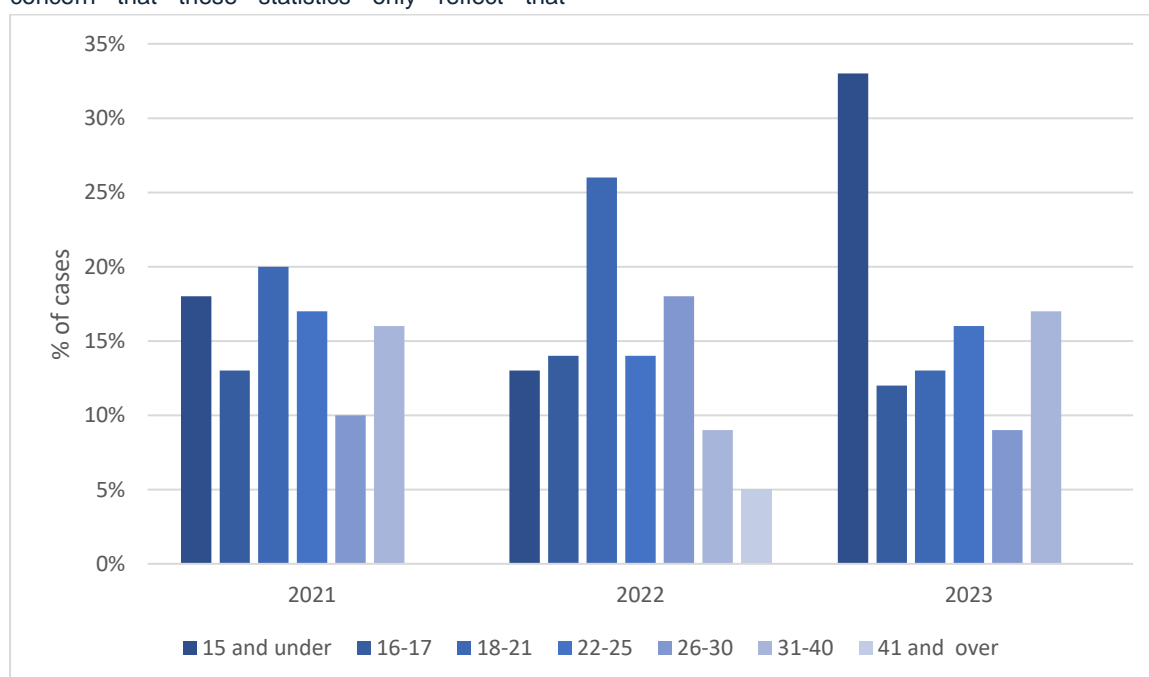


Figure 14 – Age of Victims in cases where Pakistan was the focus country, 2021-2023 (Source: FMU Statistics)

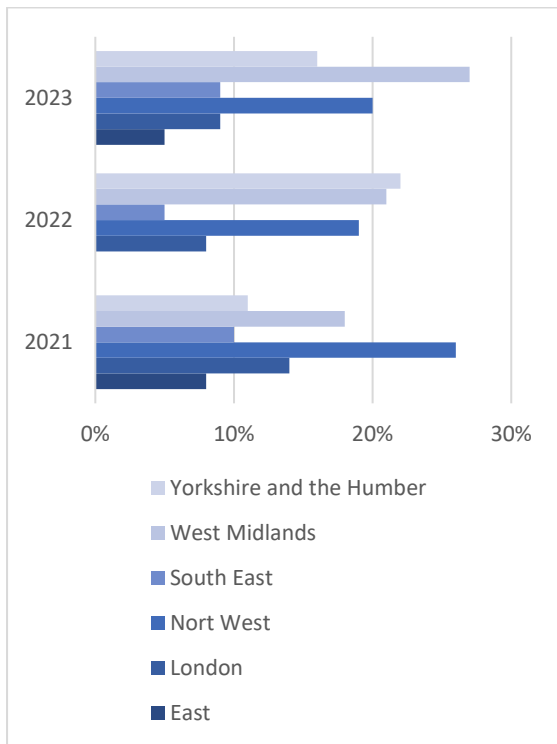


Figure 16 – Location of victims where Pakistan was the focus country 2021-2023. (Source: FMU statistics).

Again, this does not mean that cases of forced marriage with a link to Pakistan are increasing in the West Midlands. It may be that stakeholders are more aware of the issue, and/or more likely to report their concerns to the FMU.

Conversely, there were fewer cases where Pakistan was the focus country where victims were located in the North West: 27 cases (20%) in 2023 compared to 28 (19%) in 2022, and 41 (26%) in 2021. Given similar demographics to the West Midlands, this is somewhat surprising. It is true that cases have gone down overall in these years, but the proportion coming from the North West is also smaller, at least compared to 2021. It may be that these cases are declining, or it may be that stakeholders are less aware of them, and thus spot them less, or it may be that stakeholders in this region are less likely to contact the FMU about such cases than they used to be.

16% of victims in cases where Pakistan was the focus country were located in Yorkshire and the Humber. This contrasts with 2022 (22%) and also 2021 (11%). With such fluctuation, all we can say is that there are such cases in this region, at least some of which come to the attention of the FMU.

London accounted for 9% of cases where Pakistan was the focus country in 2023 compared to 8% in 2022 and 14% in 2021. These are similar figures to the South East (9% in 2023, 5% in 2022 and 10% in 2021). Again, there is not much to be gleaned from this data, apart from that cases do occur in these regions, and the FMU gives advice and support in at least some of them.

Lastly, the FMU provides data on whether victims were in the UK or already overseas when the FMU

gave advice and support. Figure 17 shows this data for 2021-2023: fewer cases than in previous years were already overseas when the FMU gave advice and support. In the main, victims were in the UK.

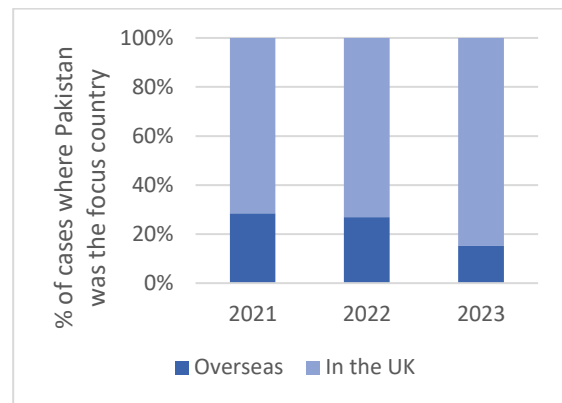


Figure 17 – Location of victims where Pakistan was the focus country (overseas, or in the UK) 2021-2023. (Source: FMU Statistics.)

Bangladesh

Bangladesh was the focus country in 29 cases to which the FMU gave advice and support in 2023. This is a decrease from 2022 (41 cases) and 2021 (32 cases).

The FMU records that there have been victims in all age ranges, but sometimes fewer than 5. I have recoded these as 0 in Figure 18, which shows the proportion of victims in each age range in 2021-2023. What is most clear is that there is very little consistency, with a large number of victims in one age-range on year, and then almost none the year after. This is probably because the overall number is relatively small – thus any change looks very significant, but actually only represents the actions of a small number of people, perhaps just one family.

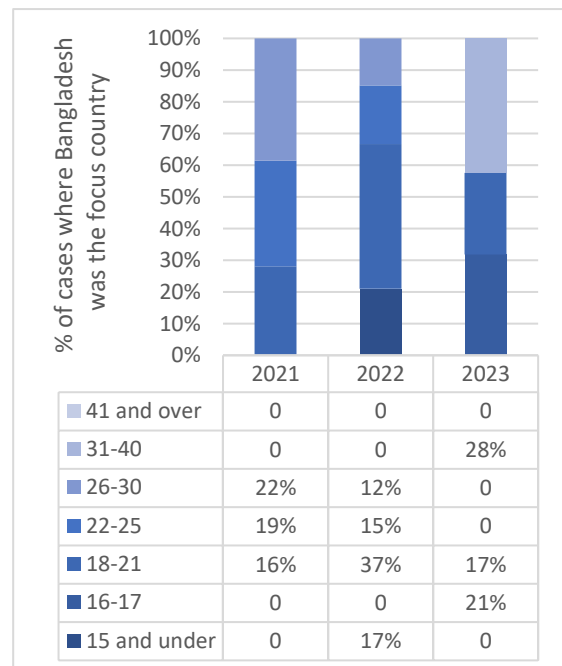


Figure 18 – Age of Victims in cases where Bangladesh was the focus country, 2021-2023 (Source: FMU Statistics).

Interestingly, in 2023 there was an almost 50/50 gender split among victims in whose cases Bangladesh was the focus country. This contrasts with 2022 (73% female, 27% male) and 2021 (75% female, 25% male). However, as the numbers are so small (14 male victims, 15 female), this is probably not representative of a larger trend. It does, however, serve as a reminder that men are at risk of FM.

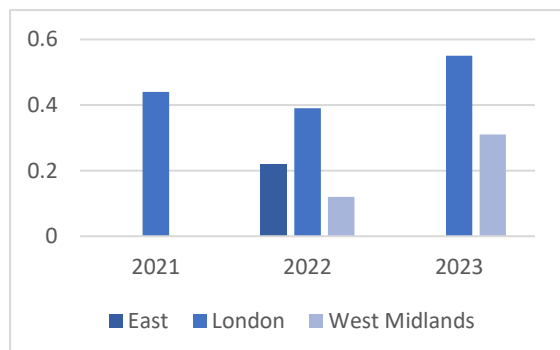


Figure 19 – Location of victims where Bangladesh was the focus country 2021-2023. (Source: FMU Statistics.)

The FMU records cases where Bangladesh was the focus country relating to 11 regions of the UK, but in the main each accounts for fewer than 5 cases each year. This is in itself interesting, showing that this problem is encountered across the country. Three regions regularly have more than 5 cases, as Figure 19 shows – the East, London and the West Midlands, though in 2023 this was only the latter two, with the East having no cases at all. Overall, in 2023, 7 regions had cases where Bangladesh was the focus country.

As with Pakistan, victims were mainly in the UK. 93% of victims were in the UK in 2023, (compared to 85% in 2022, and 81% in 2021).

India

As with some other data in this data release, there are issues with the data tables for India. 20 cases are reported for 2023 (the same number as 2022). In the data table, the same gender split is given for 2023 as for 2022 as well (75% female, 25% male). However, in the written report, this is given as 50% female and 50% male.^{xl} If this is the split, it is quite interesting (given that forced marriage usually affects women more than men). However, again, the numbers are quite small and probably cannot point to any wider trends.

Cases were advised and supported which involved victims in all age ranges (and some were unknown), but in the main there were fewer than 5 cases in each age range. This said, almost a third were aged 18-21 (7 cases), and just over a fifth were aged 26-30 (5 cases). Maximally, then, 6 were children, and this may have been as few as 2.

Cases were reported from seven regions: London, the East, West Midlands, Yorkshire & the Humber, South East, North West and North East. In all cases, this was fewer than 5 cases.

A hundred percent of victims were in the UK when the FMU gave advice and support for their case.

Afghanistan

For the first time since 2020, there was additional information published about cases where Afghanistan was the focus country.

There were 23 such cases in 2023. 91% (21) involved a female victim, and 9% (2) a male. All cases involved victims aged 25 or younger. Figure 20 shows the break down of age ranges.

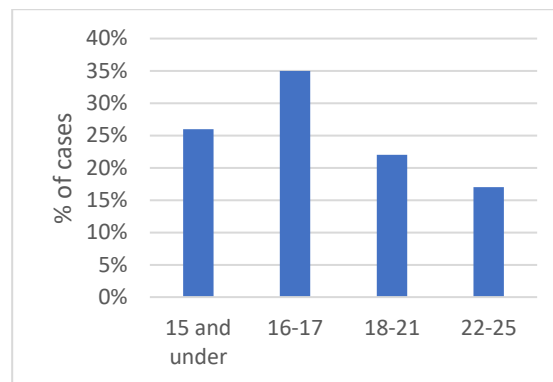


Figure 20 – Age of victims in cases where Afghanistan was the focus country, 2023. (Source: FMU Statistics.)

There were cases from the East; East Midlands, London (43% of cases); South East (22% of cases); and West Midlands, as well as some for which the region was unknown.

Akin to the other focus countries, 74% of cases involved a victim who was in the UK, with 26% involving someone who was overseas.

Conclusions

Overall, the decrease in cases to which the FMU gave “advice and support” in 2023 is of some concern. We know that the FMU does not get involved in all cases of forced marriage in the UK, and that this decrease is therefore not likely to be representative of a decrease in cases across the country. Although it may be that training provided by the FMU (and by other stakeholders) means more cases are identified and helped by other agencies, it also seems probable that many are being missed, and perhaps some which would previously have come to the attention of the FMU.

Clarity on the FMU’s statistics, and how it records “cases” and “enquiries” is welcome. But a lack of consistency between the written report and the data tables (and with the data in the tables) is worrying. Although the FMU rightly says researchers and other stakeholders should not try to use their statistics to understand prevalence, the FMU is one of the only sets of statistics on forced marriage publicly published year on year. It is a vital resource for trying to understand this issue in the UK, identify trends, and improve knowledge of who is at risk. We can no longer compare back to before the pandemic. It is vital that we can study this issue in future, using data which is consistent and presented in the same way year-on-year.

There are evident gaps in the FMU’s data, for instance, data on ethnicity is lacking. Similarly, very few people identify as being LGBTQIA+ in this dataset, which seems likely to be a case of significant underreporting.

This data serves to remind us that forced marriage happens to people of all ages, and that it affects men as well as women. It happens in all regions of the UK, even though some regions account for many more cases handled by the FMU than others. It is not clear whether this is related solely to demographic and/or socioeconomic reasons (e.g. more cases from very diverse regions), or whether there is also something of a self-selection bias, in that (for whatever reason) stakeholders from these areas are more likely to contact the FMU than from others.

On this, it is also notable how few victims contact the FMU themselves, and how many cases in 2023 came from the Home Office itself (mainly UK Border Force and UK Visas and Immigration). Forced marriage is not solely an issue relating to immigration: people can be forced to marry within the UK, and be forced to marry a fellow UK national. These cases only account for a very small number of cases in which the FMU are involved, which may be because other stakeholders can help these cases, but where there is an overseas element, there is a reason for the FMU to be involved. (This might be a plan to take someone overseas: as we can see from the FMU data, most of their cases involve people who are in the UK, be they British nationals or not.)

It is also notable how many cases the FMU gave advice and support to were cases where the forced marriage had already happened. This suggests much more could be done by many agencies (not just the FMU) to prevent forced marriages – which might, or might not, involve contacting the FMU earlier, or the FMU taking earlier action.

The same “focus countries” as usual were identified as being linked to cases, with Pakistan being linked to almost half of all cases. It is not clear whether this is representative of the actual reality of forced marriages in the UK, so it is interesting that so many cases handled by the FMU have this link. This may suggest something about who is identifying cases of forced marriage which they flag to the FMU; where they are looking for them; who they think is at risk; and what they think signs of a forced marriage might be. This is particularly a question in relating to those staff relating to UK Border Force and UK Visas and Immigration who refer cases to the FMU: are their referrals based on disclosure from victims (and what safe space do they create for that to happen)? And if not, on what basis are these cases identified and referred to the FMU?

Cases with mental capacity concerns are evidently quite different to other cases of forced marriage (where people who have the capacity to consent are forced, and/or where children are married before the legal age of consent). These cases are more likely to involve men, and more likely to

involve older victims. A different policy approach is needed for safeguarding these adults. It is interesting that so many of the FMU’s cases are these mental capacity concern cases, compared – say – to the experiences of many NGOs and service providers in the field.

Overall, the statistics give us a glimpse of a small part of the picture of forced marriage in the UK in 2023. The better this data is, the better view we get, even if it can only be a very partial view. More research is needed to understand the interaction of various bodies in this sector (e.g. the FMU and the police) to see how we might get a better understanding of the whole picture. This will involve dialogue and some efforts to (re)build trust across the sector so that, in time, a decrease in cases to the FMU is a definite sign either of decreasing cases, or of better practice across the whole sector, so that cases are being identified and dealt with before the FMU ever needs to get involved (e.g. by social services, specialist service providers, health professionals, police and/or teachers or other education providers). Evidently a change in the law did not deter all perpetrators from forcing young people to marry, just as the longer-standing law on forced marriage has not prevented any from happening. A real focus on prevention is needed, as the law is not a sufficient deterrence.

Author Information

Dr Helen McCabe. For more information, please contact helen.mccabe@nottingham.ac.uk

ⁱ The written report from the FMU cites Borders and Immigration staff: it is not clear exactly which Home Office departments they are from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023>.

ⁱⁱ <https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Assessing-the-Impact-of-Legislation-v4.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879927/Forced_Marriage-survivor_s_handbook.pdf.

^{iv} <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/20/contents>.

^v <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/contents/enacted>.

^{vi} <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/88/contents/made>.

^{vii} See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage>.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} For more information on data-collection, see Karma Nirvana's evidence to the Women and Equalities Select Committee, 31 January 2023, https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/HBA-Evidence_23-v3.pdf

^x As the FMU note, the Home Office commissioned the University of Birmingham (and the University of Nottingham) to conduct a feasibility study on how accurate estimations of the prevalence of forced marriage and FGM in England and Wales might be made." (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023>). McCabe acted as Co-I on that project, which has now been completed and the report submitted to, and accepted by, the Home Office which is "considering the findings and any potential next steps".

^{xi} See https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--ed_norm/--ipec/documents/publication/wcms_854733.pdf

^{xii} Police data is returned in the Annual Police data return; Karma Nirvana's data was included in Office for National Statistics data regarding Domestic Abuse from 2022, but this is about all HBA, not just FM; data on Forced Marriage Protection Orders is available from Family Courts, but this is very limited (basically to whether the victim was under or over 18). CPS re-started publishing their data in 2024, but there are gaps in this, and no clear explanation of whether the issues which led them to cease to publish that data have now been overcome.

^{xiii} See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

^{xiv} See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2021/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2021>.

^{xv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023>.

^{xvi} *Ibid*

^{xvii} *Ibid*

^{xviii} See FMU statistics for those years at: <https://www.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-law/forced-marriage/>

^{xix} <https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Assessing-the-Impact-of-Legislation-v4.pdf>

^{xx} *Ibid*

^{xxi} *Ibid*

^{xxii} *Ibid*

^{xxiii} See FMU statistics for those years at: <https://www.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-law/forced-marriage/>.

^{xxiv} *Ibid*

^{xxv} *Ibid*

^{xxvi} *Ibid*

^{xxvii} LGBT is the terminology used by the FMU.

^{xxviii} The data tables record 212 cases involving UK nationals, and 64 involving non-UK nationals, which (a total of 276) is fewer than 283. However, when more detail is given in the breakdown under these headline figures, there are 283 cases involving UK nationals (71 more than the total given for UK nationals), and 59 non-UK nationals (plus some categories for which it is signalled that there were fewer than 5 cases), which makes a total of 347.

^{xxix} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023>.

^{xxx} See FMU statistics for those years at: <https://www.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-law/forced-marriage/>.

^{xxxi} In the data tables, the total for non-British nationals is given as 33%, and no "unknown" nationality is listed. However, in the written report, it is reported that 16% were non-British nationals, 6% EU nationals, and 2% "unknown". 33% (which makes the total more than 100% when added to the percentage of UK nationals) is probably a typo for 23% - 63 cases involving non-UK nationals makes 22.6% of the total cases.

^{xxxii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023#nationality-of-victims>.

^{xxxiii} For some potentially salient factors, see <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2022/june/mapping-forced-marriage-risk-in-nottinghamshire.pdf>.

^{xxxiv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2022/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2022>

^{xxxv} See <https://www.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-law/forced-marriage/>

^{xxxvi} <https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/female-genital-mutilation-daily-grim-reality-girls-somalia#:~:text=Somalia%20has%20recorded%20the%20highest,the%20world%20have%20undergone%20FGM..>

^{xxxvii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023>.

^{xxxviii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023#nationality-of-victims>

^{xxxix} The FMU data tables have the genders inverted, (i.e. 63% of cases involving females), but this seems to be a mistake: they are the other way around in the written report, and this reflects the experience of earlier years.

^{xl} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023#nationality-of-victims>.