Tying the Knot: Reforming Weddings Law in England and Wales

Submitted by AWRC (Asian Women's Resource Centre), 22 September 2026

We are submitting our responses to the open consultation on weddings law reform in England and Wales.

About AWRC

AWRC (Asian Women's Resource Centre) is a specialist, by and for organisation supporting Black, minoritised and ethnic (BME) women and girls affected by domestic abuse and harmful practices. We have provided frontline, holistic, culturally competent and anti-racist support to victim-survivors for over 40 years. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and focus our comments on the areas of the proposed reforms most relevant to our casework.

Our response draws on three major points:

1. We suggest that the framework use the lens of harmful practices[1] which would help capture forms of domestic abuse that are linked to patriarchal notions of honour, shame, and purity and often justified in the name of culture and tradition. There are documented practical barriers to identifying and preventing harmful practices including forced marriage, child marriage, and honour-based abuse such as persistent underreporting, gaps in professional training and risk assessment. Meaningful involvement of survivors and BME women led organisations is crucial to overcome these barriers and holistically challenge harmful practices.
2. It is important to ascertain threats of coercion, abuse and harmful practices through individual conversations and routine enquiry, but this cannot guarantee disclosure if the woman does not feel safe materially. In cases of harmful practices, the consequences of not agreeing to a marriage are not restricted to domestic abuse and can extend to housing, immigration status, finances and broader family and community relationships.

[1] Harmful Practices are forms of violence which have been committed primarily against women and girls in communities and societies for so long that they are considered, or presented by perpetrators, as part of accepted ‘cultural’ practice. In these cases, religion, culture, patriarchal codes of behaviour and perceived notions of ‘honour’ are used by one or more perpetrators as an excuse for coercive control, threats and abuse. The most common are forced or early marriage, so called 'honour' based violence, female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) and other lesser reported forms such as faith-based abuse, menstrual huts, acid attacks, so called ‘corrective’ rape and others. Harmful practices occur across all sexes, sexual identities and genders. They are not unique to a culture or religion. Often one and more forms of harmful practices occur at the same time, escalating risks and resulting in barriers to disclosure. See Harmful Practices Strategic Partnership, Factsheet on ‘Honour’ Based Abuse, available here.

In the current political environment rife with anti-immigrant hostility, for many BME women with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds, these concerns are amplified. They risk deportation, detention and separation from close ones. There must be explicit mention of a firewall on data-sharing, wherein women are assured that their data will not be shared with the Home Office or law enforcement, without their informed consent.

3. Over-reliance on Eurocentric approaches within VAWG policy and practice reinforces colonial narratives about 'civilised' versus 'backward' cultures. Even where well intentioned, these framings can give institutional credibility to the problematic narrative that BME communities are more patriarchal or regressive than others. This narrative does not make BME women safer; the academic and sector-specific evidence shows that BME women mistrust and fear police and law enforcement authorities because of their documented and perceived racist attitudes- this is a significant barrier in accessing life-saving services and support. On the other hand, there may be a reluctance by agencies to intervene at all for fear of appearing 'culturally insensitive.' BME women are left unprotected either way.

Chapter 2 — Preliminaries: online notice, publication and the in-person interview

Our response to Questions 2, 3, and 4 is grounded in the documented barriers to identifying and preventing forced marriage. An HM Inspectorate review found that only 3 of 43 police forces in England and Wales were fully prepared to identify honour-based abuse, reflecting a systemic pattern in which professionals across agencies struggle to recognise indicators of forced marriage and honour-based abuse, or fail to apply the 'one chance[2]. Our research through the Coaction Hub[3] corroborates these findings- standardised risk assessments centred around the experiences of White, middle-class women cannot capture details regarding honour-based abuse and forced marriage- which may involve multiple perpetrators, coercive control, financial abuse and isolation. These experiences if captured inaccurately, provide a risk assessment result that does not correspond to the material risks faced by BME women.

[2] HM Inspectorate of Constabulary Report, How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse, available here, 16 December 2022.

[3] Coaction Hub, Rethinking Risk Beyond the Checklist: The Need for a Holistic and Inclusive Framework, available here, May 2025.

Often women may not be aware that what is happening with them constitutes a crime and a violation of their rights- it may be justified in the name of culture or tradition. This is especially true for women who come for different legal and political contexts, where certain marital practices may be normalised.

Question 2

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree with the type of information the Government proposes should be provided at the online notice stage? This includes material to help individuals recognise potential indicators of coercion or control, as well as any information about how to seek help through the Forced Marriage Unit, how to raise concerns during the preliminaries process and signposting to relationship support and guidance.*

We support proactive signposting at the online notice stage, but the proposal assumes a woman experiencing coercive control can safely reach, read and act on this information unobserved and unrestricted. Restriction of access to a phone, the internet or personal documents is itself a recognised indicator of honour-based abuse, not merely an incidental barrier to identifying it. In our casework, devices are routinely monitored or controlled by family and/or community members. Additionally, many women may not be able to access electronic devices due to limited digital literacy and language accessibility.

We recommend the Government build in:

- Signposting to specialist by and for BME services, not statutory routes alone. Research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner[4] supplements our sectoral knowledge that Black and minoritised women prefer to receive support from a Black and minoritised VAWG service.
- Content and language developed in collaboration with specialist BME women's sector organisations, so that indicators of coercion reflect the diverse and nuanced range of ways honour-based abuse presents, including collective and subtler forms such as social ostracism, coercive control, restriction of education, work, dress, companionship and/or movement, rather than a narrow account limited to physical threats.

[4] Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Mapping of Domestic Abuse Services across England & Wales, available here, 2022.

Question 3

> ***Consultation question:*** *What are your views about the type of evidence that should be required for the harm-based exemption from online publication of a notice?*

We strongly welcome the principle of an exemption. However, the evidential bar proposed i.e. a court order or a professional statement will exclude many of the women we support. Sectoral research highlights that BME women face disproportionate barriers to reporting abuse, including heightened shame and stigma, cultural and religious constraints, racism, limited English fluency, limited technical skills, and immigration insecurity[5]. Requiring a woman to have already obtained formal corroboration, at the very point she is trying to avoid alerting her family, risks defeating the purpose of the exemption. The lack of a formal statement does not necessarily mean that the risk does not exist, it could be unidentified or mis-identified.

We recommend the evidence threshold be widened to explicitly include:

- A supporting statement from a specialist by and for organisation caseworker (such as AWRC), without requiring a formal report to police or statutory social care.
- A self-declaration route, given the well-evidenced underreporting of honour-based abuse and forced marriage to statutory agencies. This also centres the needs of victim-survivors which may under-identified through standardised risk assessments.
- Clear guidance that fear of family or community reprisal (not only a documented history against one named perpetrator) is a valid basis for exemption, since honour-based abuse frequently involves multiple perpetrators across an extended family or community network.

Question 4

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree that at the in-person interview, registrars should be required to ask a specific set of questions aimed at identifying forced, predatory or sham marriages?*

We support this proposal, but its effectiveness depends entirely on registrars' ability to recognise indicators that point towards the risk of harmful practices including forced marriages.

[5] Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice, Life or Death? Preventing Domestic Homicides and Suicides of Black and Minoritised Women, available here, November 2023.

We encourage the practice of professional curiosity, especially given the one chance rule of engaging with a victim-survivor.

For migrant women with no recourse to public funds, disclosure will only be safe if they are guaranteed that it will not be used to penalise them for their immigration status.

For women with disabilities and limited capacity to consent, caretakers are often family members who may be perpetrators themselves, or complicit in harmful practices including forced marriage.

Through collaboration with disability justice specialist organisations, registrars can receive training on accessibility and inclusion to ensure that women with disabilities are meaningfully informed about the nature of harmful practices and forced marriage, provided a range of options post disclosure and receive support and safeguarding through this process, other than family caregiving and assistance.

We ask the Government to commit to:

- Mandatory training for registrars co-designed and co-delivered with specialist by and for BME women's sector organisations, given the documented gap in professional identification of honour-based abuse. Such training must be anti-racist, feminist and culturally grounded to minimise the risk of racial, religious, cultural or immigration-based profiling. Such training must also incorporate the lens of disability justice to address forced marriages or coercion against women with disabilities.
- Mandating an independent, professional and culturally informed interpreter (ideally trained in VAWG) rather than a family member at the interview, consistent with established multi-agency safeguarding guidance on forced marriage.
- Explicit guidance that indicators of coercion may only emerge gradually and may be harder to assess, and a clear route for a woman to raise concerns at any point up to the ceremony with safeguarding information and options.
- A firewall on data-sharing, wherein women are assured that their data will not be shared with the Home Office or law enforcement, without their informed consent.

Chapter 4 — The Dignity Framework

AWRC's central concern with the proposed dignity framework, addressed across Questions 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, is that its core concepts such as dignity, distraction, trivialisation,

seriousness, and appropriate 'presentation' and 'behaviour' are presented as neutral, when they actually centre White, Eurocentric and Christian practices as the norm[6]. Such framing reinforces a civilizational and colonial hierarchy wherein expressive, communal, 'loud' or ritual-heavy wedding traditions, disproportionately practised by South Asian, African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and other minoritised communities, are deemed departures from an implicitly White Christian-influenced norm, rather than as equally legitimate and dignified in their own terms.

We are also concerned that this framing does nothing to address the barriers to preventing forced marriage set out above: a framework unduly preoccupied with policing noise, colour, food and 'gimmicks' does not engage with the more pressing and urgent need to identify harmful practices and honour-based abuse, that agencies already struggle to identify.

Question 8

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree with the Government's proposed new dignity framework to support officiants in their legal duty to ensure that weddings are dignified?*

We do not oppose a dignity framework in principle, but cannot support it as drafted. We recommend the Government commission a specific review of the framework with specialist by and for organisations, safeguarding leads, VAWG sector experts and faith leaders who understand diverse community nuances, to test whether its standards and factors reproduce colonial patriarchal logics, and to ensure the framework focusses on evidence-based safeguarding measures that are actually shown to prevent forced marriage.

Question 9

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree with our proposed overarching dignity standard: that the wedding enables the couple to express free and informed consent in a manner that is intelligible; that the dignity of the occasion will not be undermined by distraction or trivialisation; and that the wedding will reflect the significance and seriousness of marriage as a major life event and lifelong commitment?*

'Distraction', 'trivialisation' and 'seriousness' are not self-evident concepts; they can be interpreted differently depending on the authorities' subjectivities and can be weaponised to

[6] See A.K. Gill, Social and Cultural Implications of 'Honor'-Based Violence, in Reilly, N. (ed.) International Human Rights of Women. Singapore: Springer, 2018, available here.

discriminate against BME communities. Physically participatory celebrations involving music, dance, and communal activities are integral to many South Asian, African and Caribbean wedding traditions and should not have to be watered down or restricted to fit within the narrow confines of 'dignity'.

We also caution against the phrasing of marriage as a lifelong commitment- this language comes across as orthodox and conservative. For many of our service users, divorce can change their lives for the better and help them escape domestic abuse. They need to know their rights regarding separation and divorce and receive support for initiating a divorce when it is highly stigmatised, and doing so may render them more vulnerable to abuse, social isolation and separation from wider family and community networks.

Question 11

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree with the proposed supporting standard that will support the officiant to agree a dignified wedding ceremony: that it should focus on the proceedings, treat the occasion with respect, and avoid the risk of making marriage appear trivial or lacking in significance?*

The same concern applies. We ask the Government to clarify that cultural, communal and expressive forms of celebration are compatible with and not in tension with dignity, respect and seriousness, so officiants are not left to determine cases based on their subjective analysis of what 'trivial' means.

Question 12

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree with the proposed factors that an officiant should consider when making a decision about whether a location is dignified?*

The 'separateness from other activities' and 'privacy' factors risk disadvantaging communities whose ordinary practice may be a wedding embedded within a larger, open, multi-generational gathering. We recommend these factors be reframed to test for the couple's ability to express consent, rather than a structural separateness that corresponds most closely to Western civil-ceremony conventions, to the exclusion of other conventions.

Question 13

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you agree with the factors that officiants should consider when determining whether a wedding ceremony will be dignified?*

The 'presentation' and 'behaviour' factors are prone to misinterpretation and abuse. Attire, noise, movement and communal participation that are entirely conventional within a given tradition should not be assessed against an officiant's personal or culturally specific expectations. We recommend undergo mandatory cultural competence training developed and, where possible, delivered by specialist by and for organisations, and a clearly articulated route of review where a couple believes a decision was made on a discriminatory basis.

Question 14

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you think there should be restrictions on the consumption of food or drink, including alcohol, during a wedding ceremony?*

In line with arguments made above, it is unclear how restrictions on the consumption of food and drink, including alcohol, will ensure that both people fully and freely consent to the marriage. It is another provision that runs the risk of being misinterpreted and misused, while generating stigma for BME communities for whom this may be conventional.

Question 15

> ***Consultation question:*** *Do you think there should be specific restrictions on gimmick-based or trivialising acts or elements within a wedding ceremony?*

'Gimmick-based' and 'trivialising' carry a real risk of disproportionately falling on culturally specific practices unfamiliar to a given officiant. Such provisions seem to be an attempt to sanitise wedding ceremonies and ensure they fit a standardised template i.e. of a Western Christian civil ceremony, not connected to protecting individuals from forced marriages or realising the rights of women.

Chapter 5 — Weddings in private homes

Question 20

> ***Consultation question:*** *Are there other safeguards required to (1) protect against forced,*

> *predatory, or sham marriages and (2) ensure the safety of ceremonies conducted in private homes?*

Private homes are already a common setting for forced marriage, and are inherently less visible than a public venue. Risk of coercion may also be from wider community members and extended family members- not just the husband. Honour-based abuse often includes multiple perpetrators, and safeguards need to be built to address this.

A yes/no answer may not always be meaningful to capture coercion. Someone may outwardly consent while the realistic consequences of saying no severely constrain her choices. Women with disabilities may not have been provided explanations or been able to access to information regarding the impact of consenting to a marriage. Consent should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a single verbal confirmation at the point of interview or ceremony. An individual's apparent agreement should be considered in the context of coercive control and the realistic options available to them, particularly where declining or delaying a marriage may carry serious personal, familial, financial or immigration consequences.

At the same time, we are conscious that safeguarding measures aimed at private-home weddings can, if poorly designed and implemented, translate into disproportionate scrutiny of racialised communities' homes and family life. Given the rise in anti-migrant hostility, and the weaponisation of VAWG to further racist narratives[7], this concern should be taken seriously.

Care should be taken not to construct ‘community’ itself as a safeguarding risk. Harmful practices may involve multiple perpetrators or wider family networks, but minoritised communities can equally be sources of safety, resistance and support. Risk assessment should focus on the actions and dynamics of individuals and networks involved in coercion rather than treating cultural or community affiliation as a proxy for risk.

We recommend the following:

- A mandatory, private, one-to-one conversation between each party and the officiant immediately before the ceremony, separate from the earlier preliminaries interview, since victims of honour-based abuse typically experience abuse for longer before risk is identified, and pressure can escalate between notice and ceremony.

[7] End Violence Against Women, Not in Our Name: 100+ women’s rights groups warn against racist weaponisation of VAWG, available here, 19 August 2025.

- A requirement that this conversation take place without any family member, guest or third party present, and with access to an independent, professional and culturally competent interpreter (ideally trained in VAWG), consistent with established multi-agency safeguarding practice.
- Guidance making clear that officiants' safeguarding duties in a private home are about assessing free and informed consent for the individuals in front of them, not the cultural acceptability of the home's cultural or religious character.
- Officiant training, developed with specialist by and for BME-led services, on recognising evidenced indicators of coercion in a domestic setting.
- Safeguarding measures must also recognise that disclosure of abuse can increase risk for women, and safe and confidential referrals are critical to avoid escalation. There must be clear referral pathways to specialist by and for BME services and safety planning.
- Monitoring and evaluation of safeguarding data in collaboration with specialist by and for BME services to capture patterns and challenges. This will help minimise the risk of stigmatising BME communities and identify whether particular racialised, religious or migrant communities are being disproportionately referred, scrutinised or refused ceremonies.