



Harmful Practices: Definition and Contextual Background

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. Harmful practices can 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.

The notion of 'honour' is as relevant in broader discussions on coercive control and other forms of violence against women and girls globally. It is important that we understand this continuum while distinctively understanding the specific risks (such as multiple perpetrators) and needs of women and girls from global majority backgrounds who experience so called 'honour' based abuse and harmful practices. In the UK 'honour' based abuse and harmful practices definitions are shaped by the experiences of global majority/Black and minoritised women's barriers to access, institutional racism and the specific contexts of escalation of risk in migrant and diaspora communities. Therefore, within the multiagency coordinated community response model of domestic abuse, harmful practices and so called 'honour' based abuse response is more effective when defined, informed and delivered by led by and for Black and minoritised community/global majority women's organizations.

Children and Harmful Practices:

Children are often overlooked in responses to harmful practices, despite some harmful practices directly targeting children. Many children are also harmed through living in households where harmful practices are taking place.

Under section 3 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 children under the age of 18 are recognised as a victim of domestic abuse where they see, hear or experience its effects and are related to either person involved. Some harmful practices fall outside the statutory definition but may nevertheless constitute child abuse and must still be addressed through safeguarding and child protection procedures.

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Children and young people may experience

Direct abuse:

- FGM, forced or child marriage, breast flattening, virginity testing, hymenoplasty, abuse linked to faith or belief, or other harmful practices.
- So-called 'honour'-based abuse can include threats, surveillance and restrictions on friendships, clothing, movement or sexuality.
- Family members, relatives or others in the community may pressure a child to follow strict codes of conduct in the name of family 'honour'.

Indirect abuse:

- Children may see, hear or experience abuse directed at a parent, sibling or another family member.
 - e.g. They may witness abuse directed at their mother or sister in connection with forced marriage, dowry or so called 'Honour'.
- Coercive control, family and/or community surveillance, and involvement in abuse directed at a parent, sibling or other family member.
 - e.g. a child may be pressured to monitor their mother or family member.
- Pressured to stay silent.

Online and technology facilitated abuse:

- Abuse linked to photographs, videos or online content considered 'dishonourable'.
- Threats to share intimate images, coerced image-taking, sextortion or non-consensual image sharing.
- Pressure to share passwords or keep devices visible to family members.

The impact of harmful practices may be different for girls, boys and children who do not conform to gender norms, and it is important to be mindful of this when considering impacts and risks.

Professionals should assess the child's own risks, wishes, safety and support needs, including any risks to siblings. Where safeguarding concerns relate to a sibling aged 18 or over, professionals should also consider any current or future risks to children in the family.

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Why are children's experiences often overlooked?

Children's experiences may be overlooked when:

- Professionals have limited knowledge of harmful practices,
- Agencies work in isolation,
- Gaps in specialist, child-centred support - underfunding and limited services may leave children without safe opportunities to share experiences and receive tailored support [1]
- Responses focus only on the person directly subjected to abuse.
- Professionals misunderstand harmful practices like the use of 'honour' as strict parenting or normalise it as part of their culture.
- Children may also lack the language to describe experiences that have been normalised within their family or fear the consequences of disclosure.

Some communities are often overlooked because they are not commonly associated with harmful practices. Professionals must therefore avoid both cultural stereotyping and cultural invisibility.

Professionals should recognise and challenge adultification bias, which can lead Black children to be perceived as older, more responsible or less vulnerable than their peers, resulting in their safeguarding needs being minimised or overlooked. Racism, xenophobia, disability discrimination, poverty, language barriers, insecure immigration status and No Recourse to Public Funds may further restrict access to protection and support. These barriers should be considered within safeguarding responses.

What are the impacts of harmful practices on children?

Children and young people may experience but not limited to:

- Physical pain, injury, long-term health complications or disability, alongside wider impacts on physical health.
- Trauma, sadness, fear, worry, anxiety, low mood and reduced emotional wellbeing.
- Sleep difficulties, nightmares or tiredness.
- Difficulty concentrating, learning or participating in school.
- Reduced confidence, independence and sense of control.
- Low self-worth, shame or self-blame.
- Reduced safety, stability and access to opportunities.
- Restrictions on friendships, relationships, education and social activities.

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- Fear of accessing information about relationships, sexual health, identity or support services.
- Impact on the non abusive parent-child relationships, especially if they are forced to collude with the abuse.
- Divided loyalties.
- Difficulty trusting others, forming healthy relationships or setting boundaries.
- Loneliness, isolation and reduced access to support caused by stigma, shame, family pressure or separation from support networks.
- Barriers to seeking help or telling someone what is happening due to fear of reprisal or harm, family separation, immigration concerns, community repercussions or not being believed.
- A parent's insecure immigration status or No Recourse to Public Funds can limit a child's options for leaving abuse and contribute to economic and housing insecurity, increasing dependency on perpetrators.
- Financial hardship may leave children's basic needs unmet, including access to food, clothing and basic safe housing.

Warning Signs and Indicators:

- Experience sudden changes in behaviour, attendance or school performance.
- Excessive restrictions on friendships, relationships, education or social activities.
- Monitoring by family members, including through phones, location services or social media.
- Express concerns about family 'honour', shame or bringing dishonour to relatives.
- Express fear about a planned trip abroad-especially if they mention marriage, FGM or being kept overseas. Travel alone is not a warning sign; consider the child's concerns and wider context without making assumptions about their background.
- Pressure relating to marriage, relationships, sexuality, gender identity, virginity or pregnancy.
- Present with unexplained physical symptoms, distress, self-harm or suicidal thoughts.
- Fear of speaking to professionals or ask that relatives are not contacted.

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Do's and Dont's.

Do:

- Refer safeguarding concerns to children's services and coordinate multi-agency support.
- Follow the One Chance Rule; this may be the only safe opportunity to speak with the child.
- Speak with the child privately, away from family members, community members and potential perpetrators.
- Ask about what is happening at home, rather than expecting them to recognise terms such as 'honour'-based abuse or FGM.
- Take disclosures seriously and listen without judgement.
- Explain the limits of confidentiality and be clear about safeguarding responsibilities.
- Explain what will happen next.
- Use age-appropriate, trauma-informed and child-centred communication that they understand.
- Assess the child's own risks, wishes, safety and support needs, including risks to siblings and other children in the household.
- Consider the possibility of multiple perpetrators and wider family or community involvement.
- Record and document concerns accurately, using the child's own words wherever possible.
- Use a qualified, independent interpreter where required.
- Follow local safeguarding procedures and make referrals where harm or risk of harm is identified.
- Establish a safe method of communication and consider risks associated with technology-facilitated abuse.
- Work with specialist by-and-for organisations alongside statutory safeguarding services.
- Support the safety of the non-abusive parent as part of safeguarding the child.

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Do's and Dont's.

Don't:

- Assume harmful practices occur only within particular cultures, religions or communities.
- Dismiss concerns because there is no evidence of physical injury.
- Contact, confront or inform family members, community leaders or suspected perpetrators about concerns.
- Attempt family mediation, reconciliation or informal resolution where abuse is suspected.
- Use relatives, friends or community members as interpreters.
- Promise confidentiality that cannot be maintained.
- Repeatedly question the child or ask them to prove what has happened.
- Disclose or "out" a child's sexual orientation or gender identity to family or community members.
- Assume delayed disclosure, continued contact or apparent compliance means the child is not at risk.
- Blame the non-abusive parent for the perpetrator's behaviour or focus solely on their actions.
- Advise a child to delete accounts, block contacts or change a monitored device without assessing whether this could increase risk.
- Allow concerns about causing offence to prevent safeguarding action.

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Safeguarding, Legal Duties and Professional Guidance

Professionals should respond to concerns about harmful practices using existing child safeguarding, child protection and domestic abuse procedures. Harmful practices are forms of abuse and should never be treated as private family matters, cultural practices, religious beliefs or community issues that fall outside safeguarding responsibilities.

Concerns should never be investigated by contacting family members, community leaders or suspected perpetrators

Key legal and policy frameworks include:

- [Working Together To Safeguard Children](#)
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(KCSIE\)](#)
- ['Honour'-Based Abuse and Forced Marriage: Guidance on Identifying and Flagging cases](#)
- Mandatory Female Genital Mutilation reporting duties [[gov.uk](#)], [[gov.uk](#)]
- [Forced marriage legislation, including the prohibition of child marriage](#)
- [So-called 'honour'-based abuse \(HBA\) legislation and guidance](#)
- One Chance Rule 6. [[assets.pub...ice.gov.uk](#)],

If there is an immediate risk of harm, call 999. Where significant harm is suspected make a referral in line with local safeguarding procedures.

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For Professional Advice

These services can advise practitioners on harmful practices and safeguarding. Check whether they accept referrals for children before sharing their details with a child or family.

Africa Advocacy Foundation - London-based; services may operate across London Supports African and migrant communities and is a partner in the 2026-30 Ascent Ending Harmful Practices Partnership.

Email: info@afriadvocacy.org

Phone: 020 8698 4473

Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre - Kensington and Chelsea and London-wide

Supports Moroccan, Arabic-speaking and other minoritised women and girls, including through its domestic abuse service.

Email: contact@al-hasaniya.org.uk

Phone: 020 3048 4488

Ashiana Network - Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets & Waltham Forest Email: info@ashiana.org.uk Phone: 02085390427

AWRC (Asian Women's Resource Centre) - Brent, Barnet, Kensington & Chelsea, Richmond & Harrow Email: info@awrc.org.uk Phone: 020 8961 6549

FORWARD - Croydon, Bexley, Greenwich & Merton Email: forward@forwarduk.org.uk Phone: 0208 960 4000 Southall Black Sisters - Ealing, Hillingdon & Hounslow Email: info@southallblacksisters.co.uk Phone: 020 8571 9595

Galop - UK-wide

LGBT+ by-and-for anti-abuse organisation supporting young people aged 13-25 who experience abuse from family, community members, partners or others.

Email: help@galop.org.uk

Phone: 0800 999 5428

The telephone helpline is for people aged 18+. Young people under 18 should use Galop's online referral form. https://galop-org-uk.my.site.com/s/make-a-referral?language=en_GB

Hestia - London

Provides domestic abuse refuge and community-based support for women and children.

Email: referrals@hestia.org

Phone: 0808 169 9975

IKWRO Women's Rights Organization - Camden, Enfield, Merton, Southwark & Sutton Email: info@ikwro.org.uk Phone: 020 7920 6460

Jewish Women's Aid - UK-wide

Supports Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence. Children's therapy is available for ages 4-18.

Email: advice@jwa.org.uk

Phone: 0808 801 0500

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Karma Nirvana - Supports anyone affected by Honour Based Abuse regardless of age, gender, sexuality or faith. National helpline. Can also be used by professionals.

Phone: [0800 5999 247](tel:08005999247)

Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organization - Enfield, Hackney, Haringey & Islington Email: referrals@kmewo.com Phone: 020 72631027

Latin American Women's Rights Service - City of London, Haringey, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark & Sutton Email: priscila@lawrs.org.uk Phone: 020 7336 0888

Latin American Women's Aid - London and other parts of England

By-and-for refuge and specialist support for Latin American women and children fleeing gender-based violence.

Email: info@lawadv.org.uk

Phone: 020 7275 0321

London Black Women's Project - London; based in Newham

Specialist support for Black and minoritised women and children affected by violence and abuse.

Email: info@lbwp.online

Phone: 020 8472 0528

Midaye - H&F, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster Email: contact@midaye.org.uk

Phone: 07593440944

Naz and Matt Foundation

Support victim/survivors and perpetrators (parents) of religious and cultural homophobia, honour-based abuse, LGBTQ+ forced marriage and conversion therapy. They Provide comprehensive short and long term, free to access telephone, email and group support. <https://www.nazandmattfoundation.org/support/>

Email: support@nazandmattfoundation.org

Phoenix (P&ACT) Project at PLIAS Resettlement - provides specialist support for Black, Asian and minoritised women and girls experiencing domestic abuse and harmful practices across Barnet, Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Harrow.

Phone: 020 8838 6800

Email: enquiries@plias.co.uk

Website: [P&ACT Project - PLIAS Resettlement](https://www.plias.co.uk/pact-project)

Roj Women's Association - London; based in Haringey

Women-led support for Kurdish, Turkish, Turkish-Cypriot, migrant and refugee women and girls affected by domestic abuse and other inequalities.

Email: info@rojwomen.org.uk

Solace Women's Aid - London

Provides dedicated support for children and young people who are experiencing or have previously experienced domestic abuse.

Email: cypservice@solacewomensaid.org

Phone: 0808 802 5565