

Exploring victim-survivors' lived experiences of coercion and coercive contexts in forced marriage

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Abstract

The presence of coercion is a key criterion for recognising cases of forced marriage (FM) and triggering the appropriate protective response from legal and support services. Existing research and case law have examined the ways in which explicit coercion exercised through physical force or emotional pressure vitiates consent in the context of marriage. However, research has seldom explored the complex, often subtle forms of coercion that arise within different sociocultural and community contexts. Based on an analysis of police case files and life-history interviews with FM victim-survivors across England and Wales, we explicate the lived experience of coercion across a range of contexts. Our findings extend existing conceptualisations of coercion, going beyond explicit physical and emotional force to illuminate the coercive power of sociocultural contexts. This expansion enables a deeper understanding of the total coercive burden that vitiates consent in FM. We also explore the ways in which victim-survivors exercise agency within and through these constraints.

Keywords: coercion, consent, forced marriage protection orders, 'honour', shame and policing

The definition of 'force' in forced marriage

Forced marriage (FM) violates the fundamental right to freely consent to marriage. This right is enshrined in numerous international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – a set of instruments collectively known as the International Bill of Human Rights. Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses' (UN General Assembly, 1948).

UK government guidance now defines FM as a marriage 'where one or both people do not or

cannot consent to the marriage, and pressure or abuse is used to force them into marriage’; this differs from an arranged marriage, in which ‘the families take a leading role in choosing the marriage partner, but both individuals are free to choose whether they want to enter into the marriage’ (FCO and Simmonds, 2013, 4–5). Present UK legislation – including the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 – broadens the meaning of ‘force’ beyond physical violence to include emotional pressure, including coercive control. Coercive control has been defined in case law as a pattern of behaviours directed from one person towards another that involves identifying the victim, infiltrating their life, isolating them to gain control and dominating them by any means necessary (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2021; Duron et al., 2020). It restricts the liberty of the person targeted, resulting in their entrapment and loss of autonomy (Stark and Hester, 2019). In order for civil protections against FM to be effective, therefore, practitioners within the relevant policy and enforcement framework must be adept at recognising cases where an individual has entered into, or is considering entering into, marriage under coercive conditions.

Coercive behaviour is a UK criminal offence and a form of domestic abuse (Serious Crime Act 2015, s76). Statutory guidance acknowledges that such behaviour primarily targets women and girls and is ‘underpinned by wider societal gender inequality’ (Home Office, 2015, 7). However, the function of coercive control has been studied predominantly in relation to intimate partner violence; it remains underexamined in relation to FM (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2021), which limits our understanding of how it operates and how victim-survivors respond.

Current definitions of FM require the exercise of explicit force by an agent – usually a parent, but sometimes other family members – seeking to control or subjugate another person. However, we argue that a focus on explicit coercive force, whether physical or emotional, may not reveal the ‘total burden of coercion’ experienced by a victim of FM (Anitha and Gill, 2009; Feinberg, 1986). A range of articulated and unarticulated constraints and opportunities determine the degree of agency an individual has in deciding whether to marry, whom to marry and when to marry. The ‘total burden of coercion’ considers the totality of an individual’s experience within a specific sociocultural and economic context to assess the pressures acting on their decision to marry, and how pervasive, frightening and intense the pressures and coercive contexts are felt to be (*removed for peer review*). Numerous influences intersect to shape the nature of coercion in relation to marriage, including sociocultural norms regarding gender and sexuality, disability and associated caring needs (McCabe and Stickle,

2022), state immigration and minimum marriage age policies, poverty (Anitha and Gupte, online first), and familial and community diasporic contexts (Nelson and Burn, 2025; Patton, 2025). For example, a growing body of research has indicated gendered processes related to the diasporic experience of marriage in the UK: parents may impose an unwanted marriage in order to stem the influence of Western culture on their daughter or to end her association with ‘unsuitable’ partners (Chantler and McCarry, 2020). Our study contributes to this growing body of literature by extending the understanding of coercion in ways that can help to develop a more victim-centred approach to combatting this crime.

Protective measures against FM

The Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 empowers courts to issue FM protection orders (FMPOs), a form of injunction prohibiting persons from committing acts that might lead to a named individual being forced into marriage. A potential victim, a relevant third party, the court, or any other person with the court’s leave may seek an FMPO to protect a potential or actual victim (Family Law Act 1996, s63A(1)). Section 121 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 – which made FM a specific criminal offence in the UK – also included changes that make breaching the terms of an FMPO a criminal offence carrying a maximum five-year prison sentence. The number of FMPOs rose steadily between 2009, when 101 were issued, and 2019, when 596 were issued. Following a dip during the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw an average of 330 FMPOs per year between 2020 and 2022, numbers have been rising again, with 416 FMPOs issued in 2023 and 412 in 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

An FMPO application requires the court to weigh the undesirability of state intrusion into family life against the need to protect an at-risk person from harm. Assessing the level of risk posed to an individual thus requires an understanding of the coercive pressures to which the purported victim feels subjected, as well as an awareness of the strategies adopted by the potential perpetrator(s) to overcome resistance and enforce compliance. Therefore, it is vital that practitioners – i.e., police and judges – are able to recognise context-sensitive indicators of coercion in order to accurately evaluate complex evidence and ensure that the protections of the FM legislation are working effectively.

Understanding FM

Our focus in this article is on civil protection through FMPOs and the workings of preventative and protective mechanisms and processes surrounding this injunction. The criminalisation of FM has specific implications in Western countries, where FM has come to be associated with specific minority communities (Chantler, 2023). While the putative goal of liberalism in these countries is to maximise individuals' freedom, many liberal theorists recommend restricting practices they consider illiberal (Kukathas, 1998) – for example, 'harmful traditional practices' associated with cultures perceived as illiberal (Winter et al., 2002). In the case of FM, state intervention is often represented in terms of releasing subjugated women from the shackles of their culture. Indeed, the position on FM adopted by Western states around the world has entailed a dilemma over whether to support such 'traditional' practices out of a commitment to cultural and religious freedom or to end them on the grounds that they contribute to the violation of other freedoms and fundamental human rights (Marcus et al., 2019; Villacampa, 2020).

In the UK, debates and discourses on FM are contentious in terms of both the values and normative standards associated with marriage and the representations and constructions of liberal 'Britishness' versus backwards, 'othered' minority groups (Merry, 2009; Razack, 2007). Feminists in the UK have suggested that the criminalisation of FM may reinforce essentialist stereotypes about minority cultural practices as well as the misperception that mainstream British society – in contrast with minority communities – is enlightened, liberated and law-abiding (Razack, 2004). Further, feminist scholars argue that legal measures are a necessary but insufficient route to gender justice because of the law's historical inability to capture the multiple ways in which women exercise agency within (and despite) constraints, and because the law's preoccupation with the victim-subject often results in protectionist responses that erode women's rights and reinforce gendered stereotypes (Kapur, 2005; Khazaei, 2021). Alongside these gendered considerations, FM and crimes predicated on 'honour', among others, are forms of assault on women and girls that are treated as categories uniquely embedded in the cultures of certain countries or immigrant/minority groups (Ertan and Yol, 2023). Such associations became particularly pronounced after 9/11, as the women issue became hostage to the 'clash of civilisations' rhetoric and international relations became fundamentally altered, arranged around divisive cultural and religious lines (Ertürk, 2012).

The oversimplified view of FM as belonging to an othered culture serves two distinct purposes. First, in constructing it as a culturally sanctioned crime, FM is divorced from a

clear violence against women agenda (Honkala, 2022). Second, viewing it as a culturally sanctioned act positions the host nation as a liberal and neutral force: a socially superior society within which legal remedies to the problem can be constructed, with the corollary that the othered society is essentialised as atavistic and illiberal (Razack, 2004).

This essentialist construction of violence against women within particular communities as an essential feature of ‘their unchanging cultures’ underpins a history of state inaction to protect the rights of racially minoritised women in the UK. In light of this history, and although women’s organisations serving victim-survivors have largely welcomed civil protection responses to FM, they have not welcomed the criminalisation of FM (Gill and Anitha, 2009). This is because the criminalisation of FM in the UK has little to do with the human rights of minority women and more to do with the policing of minority communities and the patrolling of the nation’s borders. It is premised on the idea that minoritised women lack the ability to change patriarchal practices in their communities from within. From this idea it follows that responses to FM cannot be found within minority communities and must instead be imposed from without (*removed for peer review*). This poses an urgent challenge for the feminist human rights paradigm, which must respond appropriately to all forms of patriarchal transgression against women and girls while avoiding culturally reductionist traps (Abji et al., 2019).

In light of these complexities and dilemmas, this article builds on existing scholarship to develop a more nuanced, context-sensitive conceptualisation of coercion in the context of FM by centring its investigation on the lived experiences of a diverse sample of victims. We argue that a victim-centred approach, which can determine the subtle and often overlooked forms of coercion, will enable the more effective identification of and appropriate responses to FM cases, helping to achieve meaningful interventions and justice for victim-survivors.

Methods and data analysis

Our research employed a mixed-methods approach comprising thematic analysis of data from life-history interviews and police case files. We felt this was the most appropriate methodology to explore the conceptual complexities involved in identifying coercion in the context of FMPOs in England and Wales as well as analysing service responses to such coercion. It also aligned with our adoption of intersectional feminism, which focuses on the voice and representation of marginalised groups (McHugh, 2014).

We sought a sample of the total cases involving FMPOs from five police forces, selecting cases from across the sampling period of 2014-2019 that gave us a diverse cohort of victim-survivors: we paid particular attention to ethnicity, age, gender, disability and sexuality (which was seldom recorded). We analysed these factors to understand the nature, patterns and features of FM, help-seeking and referral routes, the nature of service provision and policing response, the challenges and opportunities presented by FMPOs in protecting potential victim-survivors, and any FMPO breaches and case outcomes. The names of the five police forces are kept anonymous here, but they represent both urban and rural areas and include parts of England and Wales with a high prevalence of FM, and police forces in areas with a high percentage of residents of South Asian, Middle Eastern and Somali origin. The 70 police files pertained to a total of 93 individuals, as some cases involved multiple siblings. The majority (76 out of 93) of the victim-survivors were women and girls, with men and boys representing a small minority (10); the gender of seven victim-survivors was unknown because they were siblings of the primary victim. The three largest ethnic groups were Afghan (19), Pakistani (16) and Somali (16), followed by Bangladeshi (seven), Indian (seven) and Turkish (five). Of the remaining cases, nine victim-survivors were from other Middle Eastern backgrounds, two each were from African and Asian backgrounds, and three were White (Roma); the ethnicity of seven was not known.

The 11 life-history interviewees were with women of Pakistani (five), Bangladeshi (three), Indian (two) and Turkish (one) origin. Their ages ranged from 19 to 37 and none were facing a threat of FM at the time of the interview. All had left the family home as a consequence of the FM threat and had been rehoused following a stay in a refuge for victim-survivors of domestic abuse. All were heterosexual and none had disabilities that affected their capacity to consent to a marriage, though one had physical disabilities that had developed after she left her family home following the threat of FM. Themes explored were the participants' childhood and family relationships, the (threat of) FM, their experiences of help-seeking and services, the impact of FMPOs, and the specific benefits and/or risks posed by the FMPOs and their outcomes. Participants were recruited through 'by and for' domestic violence refuge services that serve victim-survivors of FM, and hence represent a sample of women who left the family home in order to escape FM.

The decision to draw upon police case files was driven by the project aim of examining the workings of FMPOs, particularly the responses of statutory and violence-against-women-and-girls services; this approach also enabled us to draw upon a

hitherto unexamined and diverse sample of FM cases across categories of age, ethnicity and gender. However, we are mindful of the difference between our two data sources, i.e., life-history narratives and police case-file accounts. The police-authored case files may have been influenced by individual officers' assessments of the evidence and case features, and thus may not reflect 'what actually happened'; accordingly, these sources need to be treated as officers' assessments of what they think happened (Canning, 2023). Such limitations are a feature of all work that relies on analysing data from police recording systems, and one should keep it in mind when interpreting the data. Nonetheless, each file offers a uniquely contemporaneous account of a case as it unfolds, capturing small details and representing the often-uneven trajectory of a case –characteristics that are often ironed out in historical accounts relying on memory and recall. Some case files also contained unamended texts of letters or emails written by victim-survivors, or transcripts of phone calls. Given that victim-survivors' experiences of FM were mediated in the files through the perspectives and voices of the police, we supplemented the case files with life-history interviews with victim-survivors in order to include their lived experiences and voices on their own terms.

We used NVivo qualitative software to manage and assist with the inductive coding and thematic analysis of the data from these sources. Our analysis of the police case files and life-history interviews focused on both the content (the story being told) and the mode of telling (the language used to tell the stories, and the ways in which the context shaped the telling) (Harder, 2023). This allowed us to examine what had happened in conjunction with how the events were recounted, both by the police in their contemporaneous notes on their cases and by the victim-survivors as they drew upon their memories to recount their experiences of violence, abuse and agency.

Ethical review and approval were provided by the Ethics Committee of the University of X as well as the police forces in Areas X and Y, which provided us with the case files. Each case file was assigned a code (e.g., Case File 1), and this article uses the case file code as a shorthand for the victim-survivor whose case the file records. No pseudonyms were assigned to the police case files, as we did not know the victims' original names and did not want to inadvertently allocate a pseudonym that might be their real name. With the interviews, we saved all the audio recordings and transcripts on a password-protected computer, with access restricted to the researchers only. We assured interviewees' confidentiality by using a code for each participant instead of her name and removing identifying information from the transcript. We allocated pseudonyms to interviewees in accordance with the naming

conventions of the region or community to which they belonged. We indicate victim-survivors' ages and ethnic categories where known.

The research necessitated a number of ethical considerations. When researching a topic that draws on a person's pain, trauma and suffering, researchers must be mindful of the burden placed on the participant (Page, 2017). Power is another key consideration in the research process (Bhopal and Deuchar, 2015). Feminist research rests on the principle of the researcher's responsibility to counter power imbalances (Harding, 2020), as the researcher has the power to manage the research process (Bhopal and Deuchar, 2015). This is particularly salient when conducting sensitive research among marginalised groups. Given the role of gatekeepers in accessing the interview participants and the power they might hold over service users, we sought to create a safe mechanism to enable the participants to decline to participate as well as to disclose any adverse experience of services safely. This entailed not sharing information with the gatekeepers about the identities of our interviewees.

We analysed the police case files and interview transcripts inductively, with the data informing the development of theory. In line with this approach and our overarching research philosophy, we used reflexive thematic analysis to generate themes – in the sense of 'patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept' (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 593) – from the data. Thus, in keeping with feminist approaches that acknowledge positionality and politics, our analysis was grounded in the data, although our approach to the data analysis was informed by our conceptualisation of the problem through the lens of intersectionality.

In the next section we present our findings on how victim-survivors' and perpetrators' behaviours are underpinned by coercive contexts derived from dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. We discuss and complexify the nature and forms of coercion in relation to FM, which range from physical violence and emotional pressure to coercive familial and sociocultural contexts where explicit force may be absent. We examine how victims respond to the coercive constraints they face, and how practitioners construct victims' agentic behaviours. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings regarding how to better conceptualise coercion in order to recognise victim-survivors' lived experiences of FM and achieve optimum protective results.

Coercive contexts created by notions of honour and shame

Feminist research has elaborated the ways in which social power relations based on gender

and sexuality are used to regulate bodies and maintain patriarchy (Gupta and Campbell, 2025). Adolescent sexuality is often discursively constructed by adults – including within family settings – as risky and undesirable (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). This is particularly the case with young female sexuality, which is constructed around notions of sexual passivity and vulnerability rather than desire (Beyer, 2022). Sexually agentic females, especially those from minority or lower socio-economic backgrounds, are positioned as risk takers or ‘bad girls’ (Kakar and Yousaf, 2022). Dominant cultural ideas about young women’s and girls’ sexuality are rooted in White, middle-class norms regarding appropriate gender display, delayed motherhood, and economic and educational attainment (Mann, 2013), positioning behaviours that deviate from these values as dangerous to both society and the individual. Gender oppression occurs when loved ones and caregivers are made enforcers of a ‘sexual contract’ to this effect (Thompson et al., 2018).

A common theme in our data was gendered parental control – which, crucially, was not always exercised physically – over children’s behaviour, clothing and mobility. The women and girls in our sample were commonly subjected to long-term parental control over their sexuality to prepare them for marriage (Chantler and McCarry, 2020; Donovan et al., 2025). Nabeela, a Pakistani woman aged 28, recounted how the way she dressed and behaved became an increasing point of contention in her relationship with her mother:

As a child I would, you know, want to go out and play with the boys, but my mum was like, ‘No, you can’t go out playing with the boys, you have to stay at home’. And it would be, ‘Why do I have to stay at home?’ ‘Because you’re a girl’.

Nabeela also recalled disclosing to her teacher the violence and abuse to which she was being subjected in the context of increasing control over her sexuality. This led her to be placed in foster care at the age of 14, about which she told us:

It was great because I could be myself, and I was treated as an equal. [...] Everybody had their jobs, but you know, there was a freedom, you know, after school you can go out to play and then you have to be back by six o’clock. And I wasn’t allowed that at home, I wasn’t allowed any sort of freedom.

Similarly, Hasina, a 29-year-old Bangladeshi woman, described her father’s increasing vigilance over her mobility and sexuality as she entered her teens:

I was having a hard time with my dad because he kind of wasn’t giving me freedom.

It's like, you know, they think that they're king of the house, yeah, it was just like that. Mum had to do whatever he wanted her to do. And it was like he was expecting the same thing from us. He didn't want me to go to college, but I wanted to go. He thought that, if I went to college, I'll, like, become a bad girl, you know, and mix with boys.

He threw his mobile on me. I just could not take it any more. Even though he didn't want me to go to college, okay, I understand that I won't go, but because he was violent to me and then just like, I felt like he didn't give me any rights, and then I did speak to one of my friends, and she said I could leave the house and I can get help, because I didn't know you could do anything like that. And then somehow, she involved the police.

Virginity

Central to parental control over young women's sexuality is the gendered construction of virginity, whereby masculine notions of honour are embodied in the question asked of daughters and sisters: 'Are you a virgin?' Virginity and the parallel discourses of gender and sexuality are forged in the FM landscape – for example, in the construction of 'honour codes' – and lived as bodily phenomena that must be controlled or oppressed. One aspect of this emphasis on virginity is the perception of female chastity as necessary to secure the patriline. As Bond (2014) points out, women's role in the familial accumulation of honour and property is limited to the preservation of value through their virginity and chastity. By ensuring a woman's virginity upon marriage, her prospective husband can be sure that any children she bears will be his, and hence that any property passed down to his heirs will remain within his family.

The control of women's sexuality thus follows from notions of male property rights over women and children, and women's ability to reproduce and carry on the patriline has been used to justify the regulation of their behaviour and sexuality across history and cultures. This view of women as chattels – conduits through which male property is passed, and which can be disposed of or controlled for that purpose – dehumanises women and children alike, making it easier to justify violent behaviour towards them if they attempt to resist or undermine the patriarchal structure through their actions (Khazaei, 2021).

Such considerations shaped the parental decision to force two Iraqi sisters, aged 13 and 15,

into marriage, as recounted in Case File 9. The older sister had overheard a conversation between their parents: ‘Dad was talking about how I probably wasn’t a virgin’. She and her sister were terrified that something was going to happen to them imminently. Their father’s sister sent two dresses for the older daughter, which looked like an engagement dress and a nightdress. Their mother made the older daughter try on the dresses before putting them away, leading the girls to fear that a wedding trousseau was being prepared. Whenever the older sister returned home late from school, their father accused both girls of having sex and not being virgins, saying their ‘bad behaviour’ was making them ugly. Once he told their mother to ‘check’ the older sister: ‘Mum tried to pull down my trousers, she wanted to check I was a virgin’. The older sister resisted this assault. Both sisters were repeatedly reminded by their parents of their status as embodied, gendered, sexual(ised) beings who had been assigned a subject position within the hegemonic binary discourse of virginity. The parents reinforced this by teaching the sisters to regard their virginity as valuable and suggesting repercussions if their virginity was in doubt, which incited the girls’ fears of FM and rape.

The triggers for parental decisions to force daughters into marriage are often connected to dominant constructions of gender and female sexuality and to particular manifestations of these constructions within diasporic communities. Frequently, women’s families perceive any unions across religious, national or racial divides as unacceptable, and unions within the community that have not been arranged or approved by both sets of families may also be frowned upon.

Similar instances of the policing of female sexuality to enforce victim-survivors’ conformity to gendered norms around sexual ‘purity’ are documented in reported judgements we have analysed elsewhere as part of this research (Noack-Lundberg et al., 2021). We analysed 33 FMPO-related judgements, finding that perceptions of culture, consent, disability and victim credibility influenced how evidence was interpreted and how forced marriage was constructed (Noack-Lundberg et al. 2021). For example, in one of our cases that we examined (Brighton and Hove City Council and Chief Constable of Sussex and MQ and FQ and CQ, DQ and EQ (by their Children’s Guardian Lesley Beveridge), neutral citation [2018] EWHC 3979 (fam)), three siblings of North African background – two teenagers and one younger girl – were taken by their mother and uncle to a country in North Africa, purportedly for a holiday, and held there against their will. The uncle was physically violent towards the children and also had a history of physical violence towards their mother. It transpired that the real reason the mother and uncle had taken the children was their concern that the

daughter, CQ, had a boyfriend in England and had been engaging in sexual activity with him. CQ alleged that her uncle had threatened to pin her down to find out if she was a virgin and that she had been sent to a doctor to ‘confirm’ whether she had lost her virginity. CQ’s brother’s statement supported her account:

He kept firmly to his account of hearing his mother talking to Uncle M about marrying off CQ, which was because his mother had found out that she had lost her virginity.

Further, several of our police case files featured narratives involving parents’ discovery of (real or imagined) relationships that had developed at school or college, followed by retaliatory violence from those parents and the threat of FM. This underscores the regulatory nature of the virginity regime, which defines daughters’ bodies as the communal responsibility and property of the family. The nexus between FM and virginity is thus a critical form of violence against women, predicated on a concept of honour in which women are always implicated as gendered bodies. The nexus creates a coercive context that operates by instilling fear and inculcating oppressive values. Social control mechanisms that bring about the regulation and policing of the body – such as commodification, objectification, stigmatisation and exploitation – recurred in our data in relation to these ideas of virginity and honour. The gender regimes in our data were marked by honour-based violence (HBV), with the term ‘honour’ mentioned numerous times and often conflated with virginity.

Differential gendered norms underpinning parental control

Household regimes reflect dominant ideologies about gender in particular communities: typically, women and girls are held responsible for upholding the family honour and are policed to prevent them from bringing shame on the family through (real or perceived) non-conformity to gendered norms (Mangat and Gill, 2024). Societal norms in the communities in our data construct a feminine ideal of an honourable young woman who will preserve her (presumed) virginity until she marries a man acceptable to the family. Women in these communities are expected to maintain public displays of sexual modesty and appropriate shame to prevent reputational damage to their families. Daughters who challenge their parents, particularly regarding the decision to marry, represent the antithesis of the ideal by exercising agency, which is associated with sexual promiscuity.

While these forms of control are predominantly imposed upon women and girls, we found

parental control being exercised over the movements and behaviours of the five Somali men and boys and the two Pakistani men. Case File 1 reported the attempted forced remarriage of a 21-year-old Somali man held in Somalia at the behest of his parents, who sought to coerce him into marrying a woman of their choice. After returning to the UK, the son gave a statement to the police about his attempted FM:

Mum was asking who I was with. I'm young, I want to live my life. When I ignore her, I get interrogated at the door. Asking 101 questions, talking to me about my own stuff. Mostly Dad asks questions, I don't tend to reply. Always questions. 20 minutes of interrogation at the door before I leave the house. Makes me feel annoyed. I used to smoke cigarettes and get drunk. [...] They had their suspicions, like, finding cigarette packets in my room. They asked if I ever smoked and I said that they were a friend's, not mine. They found out, that's why they sent me to Somalia.

We found that control exercised over gendered behavioural norms played a key role in creating the context for FM, operating in tandem with notions of honour and shame. However, we found significant gendered differences in the nature, extent and impact of parental control over men and boys compared with women and girls. One key difference was the absence of strict parental policing of men's and boys' sexuality, so long as their eventual marriage partner was acceptable to the parents. The men and boys reported that their parents had concerns about the consumption of alcohol, smoking, and activities proscribed by their faith. For the women and girls, gendered norms regarding sexuality and chastity were often the defining features of their lives. Men's and boys' accounts described the everyday control to which they were subjected but also articulated their capacity to resist it to some extent ('I used to not answer the phone'; 'I tended not to reply'), unlike the women and girls in the sample. Thus, there was also a gendered difference in the impact of (attempted) parental control, which was less likely to curtail the mobility of men and boys and was often constructed by them as an unwelcome intrusion, unlike the limits it created for women and girls.

Gender intersects with sexuality to shape the experience of FM for individuals whose sexuality is constructed as deviating from heterosexual norms (Gill and Begum, 2023). In communities where coming out as LGBTQI+ is stigmatised or proscribed, LGBTQI+ people may be forced to marry for the sake of the family's honour (Hennebry and Hari, 2024), as

well as being subjected to HBV until they renounce their LGBTQI+ identity and obey ‘honour norms’ (Filipiak, 2024; Lowe et al., 2019).

Our data contained one case where the context of the FM was LGBTQI+ identity. Case File 5 documented the HBV and FM inflicted upon a 20-year-old Muslim woman originally from Saudi Arabia. At the age of 16, she reported to her school counsellor that her parents were planning to force her to marry a 30-year-old man based in the UK. Her refusal to enter into this marriage led to a year of verbal abuse from her parents, until eventually she decided to leave home. She later returned to the family home and attended university, but the pressure on her to marry did not abate. The woman disclosed her sexuality to her brother, who she suspected then told her mother, creating a sense that her family were acting together to monitor her behaviour. The woman eventually came out to her mother after moving in with her girlfriend; shortly afterwards, her mother tricked her into visiting the family home, where she was locked up and subjected to violence for several days. The woman overheard her mother saying on the phone that they wanted to ‘send her back’ to marry her off.

Case File 5 illustrated the costs of constructing one’s own discourse of resistance. The young woman’s Muslim community deemed that to be honourable meant to be heterosexual, or at least to perform heterosexuality; a child’s deviation from this standard would be regarded as a parental failure. By insisting on her LGBTQI+ identity, Case File 5 enacted power and agency, disrupting community norms and bringing shame upon her family (*removed for peer review*). Arguably, such social consequences, which extend beyond the individual and implicate the whole family, create strong coercive pressures even in the absence of explicit physical or emotional force (both of which were also present in Case File 5). Our findings signpost a need to better understand the experience, dynamics and impact of FM in the context of LGBTQI+ and non-binary gender identities.

Forms of coercion in FM

Physical coercion was a common feature of our sample, but so was non-physical coercion – a key finding, as the latter is less documented in existing scholarship on FM.

Emotional coercion: Shame and love as forms of control

Case law recognises explicit emotional coercion – for example, telling a victim-survivor that they will bring shame or loss of status upon the family if they do not agree to marriage – as grounds for annulment (Anitha and Gill, 2009). Forms of emotional pressure found in our

data included warnings against being a cause of shame; promises that an individual could continue their education if they agreed to marriage; and threats to terminate an individual's education if they refused to marry. In some cases, the expectation of marriage was repeatedly reinforced by family members over the course of several months or years, a pressurising tactic that has been compared to grooming (Chantler and McCarry, 2020).

Age-related vulnerabilities were exploited by families across the data, heightening the feeling of emotional pressure by adding a dimension of imminence or urgency. For example, several victim-survivors recounted that coercive regimes were exacerbated during their adolescent years in anticipation of a marriage soon after they turned 18. Case File 60 involved a 15-year-old schoolgirl living with her Pakistani family who had grown up with the expectation that she would marry her cousin in Pakistan. She told police:

My mum would speak to her brothers and sisters back in Pakistan. She sometimes showed me photos of my cousin, suggesting that I should marry him. My cousin's mum called me her daughter-in-law.

When she did not show any interest in the match, her mother's suggestions became more explicitly pressurising. The girl articulated to the police her sense that the level of risk she faced was linked to her age:

She said, 'You'll have to marry him. I'll make you marry him when you're 16'. I'm 15 now. I don't think she'll do it when I'm in year 11 – I think, when I leave school, so I have nowhere to go [for help].

But age is not the only factor; location and gender can also determine the extent of the perceived coercion. Asma, a 31-year-old Pakistani woman, recounted the emotional pressure exerted on her brother by her mother and the latter's relatives during a family visit to Pakistan:

My older brother said, 'Look, I've a partner in England, and she's having my baby, and she's British, a White lady, and I'm going to stay with her, and this marriage can't take place', and they were like, 'No way'. When we all got back, they brought her over anyway, but he wouldn't stay with them in the family home.

Although this emotional pressure overwhelmed her brother's capacity to exercise choice while in Pakistan, his gendered privilege enabled him to evade the FM once back in the UK, as we have documented elsewhere (Anitha et al., 2018).

One facet of an individual's location within social relations of power is based on immigration status. This was exploited in two cases where the insecure immigration status of the victim-survivor underpinned the parental exercise of emotional pressure. In Case File 45, a 23-year-old Indian woman – a recent migrant who had joined her father in the UK and had insecure immigration status – experienced what is now recognised as immigration-based abuse (Alsinai et al., 2023):

She has been informed by the offenders that she will be going to India for an arranged marriage. She stated she doesn't want to marry this male [...] and wishes to remain in the UK for education. Offenders have reacted to this by stating that if she doesn't marry this male she will bring dishonour to their family. She has also been told that if she does not marry the male her UK family visa will not be renewed by dad.

Our data also revealed a less widely recognised form of emotional pressure through the use of black magic or juju. In cases where victim-survivors perceived these spiritual belief systems to be efficacious, it seemed to weaken their sense of agency or belief in their own capacity to resist FM, as well as undermining the effectiveness of efforts made to keep them safe. Case File 59, involving an 18-year-old Somali woman, reported:

She has raised concerns that [...] her mother plans on using black magic in order to get her back to Somalia. I have assured her that at this time it is going to be difficult for her to travel as she does not have a passport and we have the marker on her PNC [Police National Computer] ID. Her partner is also a believer in black magic. I have suggested they go see a local Imam to discuss these concerns.

Coercive contexts created by spiritual belief systems, in which perpetrators use these belief systems to subjugate their victims, are a less well understood aspect of domestic abuse scenarios. Research carried out into the ways in which human traffickers' control and silence victims of sexual exploitation suggests that it is essential to understand and expose these less familiar cultural, spiritual and psychological control mechanisms in order to develop an informed protective response (Chisholm et al., 2022). In July 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a historic resolution on harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks as a form of human rights abuse (Forsyth, 2022).

Short of physical force, families use a range of strategies to emotionally pressure their children into marriage; this force is tailored to the specific circumstances of the

victim-survivor and their location within intersecting social relations of power, such as those based on gender, age, immigration status, location and belief system. Understanding these coercive forces thus requires us to go beyond the ‘reasonable person’ test (discussed below) to ascertain the total burden of coercion for that specific subject within their social context.

Coercive familial and sociocultural contexts

Compared with direct emotional coercion by an agent such as a parent, it can be harder to recognise coercion in scenarios where a victim-survivor perceives a lack of options or genuine choice but cannot point to specific instances where force or emotional pressure has been deployed against them. A general fear of public judgement and dishonour is often enough to enforce adherence to social norms (Mangat and Gill, 2024), creating a coercive sociocultural context in which a victim might feel they have no choice but to act in a certain way. In these contexts, families create pre-emptive coercive regimes that may not immediately punish the victim; instead, they sanction anticipated transgressions on the part of, for example, the victim-survivor’s family members, such as older sisters or aunts. Making an example of others instils fear into the intended victim-survivor and inculcates a deeply ingrained sense of the ‘right’ way to behave. Pre-emptive coercive regimes can also operate through gossip about and ostracism of those within the wider community who are presumed to violate honour codes. Pre-emptive regimes unfold over long periods and operate by insinuation and supposition rather than direct punishments and explicit directives against the victim-survivor; consequently, the latter may not identify them as coercive at all.

For example, in Case File 19, a 15-year-old Afghan girl – her parents’ youngest child and only daughter – came to the attention of the police and social services following a referral by her school. She had been spotted at a window on the top floor of the school, threatening to jump. After being talked down by her teachers, she confided to them that she was ‘being forced into marriage with her cousin’ and ‘does not want to do it’. She repeatedly stated that she wanted to kill herself. For years she had overheard family discussions about her marriage to one of her cousins. The week before her threatened suicide, she had heard her father tell her mother: ‘Let’s start the process between her and her cousin’. While the parents had not exercised any explicit physical force or direct emotional pressure, her familial context presupposed absolute deference to her parents; hence, she felt unable even to articulate a lack of consent.

Indeed, in the majority of the cases we examined, the victim-survivor’s parents regarded

arranged marriage as the ideal scenario: such a marriage would uphold the family honour, maintain a connection with the home country, and facilitate the marriage-related migration of a relative. In many of these cases, the victim-survivor – usually a young woman – felt unable to express her lack of consent to her parents’ proposed match, turning the dynamic into an FM situation. In such situations, where there is no explicit parental coercion, services may construct the victim-survivor’s fears as unwarranted; those fears can only be understood by examining the familial context within which any process of consent can (or cannot) be engaged.

Thus, recognising that coercive violence is situated in social structures of inequality is key to understanding the ways in which an individual might experience a situation as coercive without explicit force being used. To uncover these forms of contextual coercion, it is crucial to attend to the nuances in victims’ stories, where the ‘spectral’ forms of power that characterise coercive control reside (O’Callaghan, 2025; Stark and Hester, 2019). For example, Case File 14 recorded the experience of a 17-year-old Indian girl, a rape survivor, who provided the police with an account of the context in which she had ‘agreed’ to an engagement:

Subject’s father told her that she was a burden on her family and subject ‘felt bad’ so agreed to marry the man. [...] She tells me her mum managed to talk her into it and convinced her to do so without threats (although she was still unhappy about it). [...] She told me she never told her parents directly that she did not want to get married since returning to the UK from India. Instead, she came up with reasons to delay the marriage and planned on moving out when she got to 18 years old and could support herself.

The nature of her family relationships, her parents’ lack of support following her rape, their construction of the marriage as a way for them to shed the ‘burden’ she had become to them following her rape, all conveyed to the victim the absence of any real choice within the familial context. It was clear in her mind that the only way to escape marriage was to exit that context by leaving the family home. We identified two other cases involving a familial assumption that the young woman would agree to the marriage, with no sense on the part of the victim-survivor that she had any choice. In these cases, the family dynamic created a feeling in the victim that there was no point in expressing a lack of consent; consequently, there were no explicit signs of coercion in the form of violence or emotional pressure

designed to break resistance – which are the behaviours that protective agencies are primed to recognise and act upon.

These cases highlight the importance of being able to identify how and when coercive norms and dynamics are operating – often subtly and indirectly – within a social structure. It is crucial to think beyond the construction of individuals experiencing coercion as victim-survivors who can only be perceived and understood in terms of their vulnerability, and to pay attention to how they exercise their agency within a specific sociocultural and structural context. This involves adopting an understanding of agency that is not underpinned by individualised or psychological notions of the self. Our findings demonstrate that the agency of FM victim-survivors is located within and arises from the coercive contexts in which they live.

Police recognition of coercion and agency

The police case files in our sample were second-hand accounts that recorded reported events through the eyes of the officers who wrote them, occasionally providing insights into the author's thoughts and attitudes regarding the witness statement. We observed from the files that in their investigations, police often sought to establish whether there had been any direct threat or explicit pressure applied to the victim by another person. Investigators tended to focus on what was said or not said (i.e., explicit communication), on signs of resistance by the victim, and on perpetrators' reactions to any expressed desire not to marry. In cases where parents were shown to have exerted physical force or emotional pressure, police sought evidence that the victim had made 'reasonable' attempts to resist or evade parental control, or else that the coercion or violence to which they were subjected had overwhelmed any possibility of escape.

Case File 29 (Turkish woman, aged 23), for example, includes both the victim-survivor's statement to the police and, in parentheses, the observations of the police officer taking the statement:

She tells how the mother keeps the front door locked and with the chain (Although it is not locked with a key from the inside which is then removed, and she could still have escaped if she had tried.) and how she can't get out of the back door as the mother is always in the kitchen.

Towards the end of a statement detailing how the woman was abducted and imprisoned in the

family home, Case File 29 notes:

She says that the mother takes her passport, birth certificate and bank card from her bag and hides it from her saying that she will fly to Turkey and marry her cousin and to do as her father tells her. (She does not make any realistic attempts to escape at any point.)

All the police case files we analysed entailed FMPOs, as that was our criterion for inclusion. Our analysis of the files enabled us to observe the trajectory of each case as it unfolded over time, including where initial disclosure to the police was met with inaction or minimisation in the context of subtle forms of coercion. Such disclosures sometimes led to retaliatory violence by parents, and/or by an escalation or change in the form of coercion in ways that were intelligible to the police and ultimately led to the FMPO. But although FMPOs were eventually issued in all our police cases, protective responses were arguably delayed by the failure to recognise the total burden of coercion (Feinberg, 1986) acting on a victim, which includes societal norms relating to marriage and other unspoken yet powerful internalised social codes that prevent or suppress resistance and confrontation. Our findings thus point to the need for further research to illuminate the ways in which coercive contexts function and how to recognise these situations.

Telling and dwelling: Voice, resistance and subversion

The previous section highlighted a need for greater awareness among the police and other service providers about what different forms of violence do to victims' 'space for action' (Lundgren, 1998; Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2018) and the forms that resistance might take in these contexts. A victim-survivor may exercise resistance or subversion in ways that support services have difficulty recognising as such. For example, a delay in departure from an abusive situation may be misread by services as an endorsement of abusive behaviour; however, we found that various surveillance methods were used to monitor victims' actions and movements, creating numerous barriers to exit, which meant that a successful escape usually occurred only after a long process of emotional and financial preparation.

A person's space for action is the degree to which they are able to take control of their own life, choices and actions. Sharp-Jeffs et al. (2018) have sought to understand the relationship between coercive control (i.e., being subjected to demands and surveillance) and space for

action. They interviewed a sample of 100 women who had accessed domestic violence services; unsurprisingly, they found that women experiencing higher levels of coercive control tended to have less space for action. When the women left the abusive relationships, their space for action increased; however, this change was not necessarily permanent, and many women experienced ongoing manipulation by their abusers after the end of the relationship, as well as facing structural barriers to establishing and maintaining their freedom (e.g., reduced welfare and other social and legal remedies).

As Sharp-Jeffs et al. (2018) concluded from their findings, violence is not linear. One aspect of this non-linearity is that mothers and other women can engage in coercive behaviour while simultaneously being victims of male abuse themselves. These women are operating in a coercive context that makes it difficult for them to distinguish between what they are doing to others and what is being done to them. We encountered an example of this during our interview with Amera, a 19-year-old Pakistani woman who had gone to a refuge to escape the threat of FM when she was 17. A few weeks into her stay, she had been feeling low, so she had called her mother but remained silent during the call. Amera's mother knew that it was her daughter reaching out. They eventually spoke, and Amera decided that she wanted to see her mother. She recalled her visit to the family home:

Dad opened the door, and my mum, aunty, cousin [and] sister were at home. They asked me to return home. They said that if I return now, everything will be fine, they will forgive me. I told them that I didn't want to come home, and then dad said that after this chance, there will be no chance for me to ever return.

That night, Amera shared a room with her mother. Her mother confronted her, saying Amera's teacher had told her about Amera's 'multiple boyfriends'. Amera was repeatedly told by her mother that she was the family's 'respect', and only she could uphold that respect. Her family kept saying she could return now as if nothing had happened, because none of the wider family was aware that she had left. Amera maintained her stance of refusal in the face of this pressure. Once it became clear that Amera's resolve would not break, her mother was keen for her to leave the family home first thing in the morning, as her visit had breached the FMPO. Reflecting on this incident during the interview, Amera said she had sought and obtained closure from the visit. She had needed to see her parents, particularly her mother, to be sure that they were not sick or falling apart because of her actions. Having ascertained this, she had not spoken to any of her family again.

As we argued above, the agency of FM victim-survivors is located within and arises from the coercive contexts in which they exist. This includes instances where they exercise agency by voicing what they are experiencing as harmful. Ahmed (2015: 10) writes:

The struggle for recognition can also come from the experience of what is unbearable, what cannot be endured, when you lose your bearings, becoming unhoused. The struggle for recognition can be a struggle for an ordinary life. [...] In making an ordinary life from the shattered pieces of a dwelling, we dwell. We dwell, we tell.

Amera's story exemplifies the stubbornness that Ahmed's (2015) notion of telling and dwelling evokes: a staying put; a wilful demand to be heard; an insistence on picking up the available tools for telling one's story and using them to craft new forms of being and knowing. Practitioners might view Amera's reaching out to her mother and her return to the family home as a form of reconciliation when in fact it was a gesture of subversion and resistance. Resisting erasure is a learned tactic for surviving the gendered forms of violence associated with FM, a tactic that crosses material and symbolic boundaries (Mack and Na'puti, 2019).

The juxtaposition that Ahmed (2015) sets up between 'dwelling' and 'telling' is also instructive for thinking about coercion in relation to FM, an experience that literally and figuratively 'unhouses' women, forcing them into a process of 'telling' – for example, when seeking help from the police or other outside agents. While telling is certainly no guarantee that one will be rehoused, it is nonetheless required to achieve the various kinds of recognition (i.e., respect) that might call forth an ordinary life. But for many FM victim-survivors, telling – to teachers, police or social services – can be unintelligible too because those listeners will mishear or misunderstand the truth. This highlights both the complexity of coercion in different sociocultural contexts and the importance of understanding its insidious nature.

Cases such as Amera's highlight the ties that bind in the midst of gendered violence and the politics of moral control. In these often close-knit relationships, demands take the form of expectations that do not need to be explicitly stated because the parties have a shared understanding of the costs of non-compliance. Compliance becomes so routine that victims may not recognise the extent to which their behaviour is controlled by others, especially not in an abusive way (Dutton and Goodman, 2005). This is a discomfiting paradigm, but avoiding the notion of blurred lines in FM cases does not lead to clarity; rather, recognising

and confronting the causes of our discomfort enables us to study these cases more honestly.

Conclusion

Each of the subjects in our study responded uniquely to their experience of FM. Their levels of awareness, resilience and resistance were influenced by a combination of their sociocultural and structural contexts and their individual circumstances and personalities. Recognising the complex nature and forms of coercion that act upon individuals in FM situations is key to understanding and empathising with the lived experiences of victim-survivors. To achieve this perspective, it is crucial to gain insight into the specificities of FM coercion in particular communities and to understand how these factors interact with other forms of gendered violence such as HBV. In much of the existing scholarship – which draws predominantly upon the experiences of South Asian victim-survivors – there is an assumption that the same forms of coercion are experienced across different communities (Mangat and Gill, 2024). Our groundbreaking study is the first to examine socio-ethnically diverse survivors' experiences, uncovering hitherto unexamined forms of violence and coercion in FM, particularly the impact of coercive familial and sociocultural contexts.

Physical violence, including HBV, is the form of coercion most intelligible to practitioners, particularly police, who search victims' accounts for evidence of violence, or direct threats of it, to determine whether the victim-survivor's fear of harm is 'reasonable'. Evidence of physical violence seems to bolster criminal justice agencies' recognition of the risk of FM. Practitioners also readily recognise explicit emotional or financial pressure exerted (mainly) by parents – for example, by invoking the threat of dishonouring the family or threatening to withdraw funding for the victim-survivor's education. We found common instances in our data where the oppressive force of gendered norms and the fear of community judgement placed a coercive burden on victims in the absence of directly articulated threats. However, practitioners did not always recognise this as coercion. Police did not always acknowledge the impact of forms of coercion that were not directly or explicitly enacted by a perpetrator, but rather were perceived by the victim-survivor as derived from familial and sociocultural contexts. Such coercive contexts or environments are evident in victim-survivors' accounts of neglect, unmet needs and child abuse, as documented elsewhere (Anitha and Gupte, online first). In our interviews and police case files, female victim-survivors articulated that their experiences of childhood – which were often markedly different from their brothers' – had been determined by their gender or exacerbated by their gendered devaluation within the

family. These women and girls were made to feel that, in the eyes of their family, they were only good for domestic work and marriage; consequently, their perceived lack of choice regarding marriage was grounded in societal, family and interpersonal dynamics that operated independently of explicit force or threats.

The law deems coercion to be present if a perpetrator is in a position to carry out the threatened negative consequences, or if a victim reasonably believes that a perpetrator is in a position to do so. In many cases, the victim-survivor's instrumental belief is that their family members have sufficient authority over them to demand effective control over their life choices, regardless of any articulation of actual threats. This authority is derived from a sociocultural context that inculcates fear of the consequences of refusing marriage, including abandonment and family-wide dishonour. Our research demonstrates how these contexts and beliefs place victims in a position where they are unable to engage with the consent process. It is the ability to freely engage in the process of choice, rather than simply reacting to posited consequences, which is key to distinguishing consent from coercion.

Our findings on the nature and forms of coercion have practical implications for the enforcement of FM policy and legislation, highlighting gaps in practitioners' existing conceptualisations of and responses to coercion. The act of making a formal disclosure is often risky and traumatic for victims, requiring a leap of faith. It is thus imperative that disclosures are met with an appropriate, sensitive response that takes account of the 'one chance' rule: a practitioner may have only one chance to speak with a potential victim, and thus only one chance to save their life. Recognition of the complexity of victims' lived experiences of coercion is crucial to enabling disclosures to be made and heard, and to sustaining a potential victim-survivor's engagement with services.

FMPOs are an important remedy that can prevent FM, protect potential victims, and assist those who have already been forced into marriage. The effective use of this remedy entails acknowledging the total burden of coercion that impacts on victims' lived experiences at the intersection of different social relations of power. Adequate victim protection depends on the framework's ability to recognise shifting, complex and sometimes subtle forms of coercion as they are perceived and experienced by individuals whose space for action is subject to a range of constraints (Lundgren, 1998).

Our findings reveal, elaborate and complexify some of the coercive contexts and forms of coercion that occur in FM cases across different communities. It can be difficult for agents

involved in these cases, including practitioners and the victims themselves, to grasp the subtle and insidious nature of coercive contexts. By closely examining victim-survivors' narratives of their experiences – some of them documented by practitioners' contemporaneous notes in police case files – our research extends the conceptualisation of coercion beyond the direct exercise of physical and emotional pressure, incorporating broader coercive sociocultural contexts that function to vitiate consent. Recognising victims' positionality within social relations of power, including those that exploit gender, sexuality and age-related vulnerabilities, is critical to understanding the total coercive burden acting upon an individual's choice to marry.

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