



SUMMARY REPORT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

FREE AND FULL CONSENT: TACKLING CHILD AND FORCED MARRIAGE

'10 million girls under the age of 18 marry each year.

That equates to approximately: 833,333 girls a month, 192,307 girls a week, 27,397 girls a day or 19 girls every minute. In other words one girl is forced into marriage every three seconds.'

Breaking Vows: Early and Forced Marriage and Girls' Education, Plan UK (2011)

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION FORUM

In July 2011, the Foreign Policy Centre in partnership with Plan UK hosted a roundtable discussion forum at the House of Commons. The event marked the launch of a Plan UK publication entitled "**Breaking Vows: Early and Forced Marriage and Girls' Education.**" In addition, it also aimed to explore how policy-makers across UK Government departments and agencies might strengthen national and global alliances (and networks) to increase the political priority given to the issue of child and forced marriage.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

The roundtable discussion aimed to bring together a diverse audience from the worlds of: politics, academia, government, the media, community-based organisations and international NGOs. Organisations represented included: Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the law firm Dawson Cornwell, the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) at the UK Foreign Office, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Plan UK, the UK Government Equalities Office, the BBC World Service Trust's Afghan Women's Hour Programme, Karma Nirvana, Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD), BBC Radio 4's the World Tonight programme, 4 Paper Buildings - the Chambers of Jonathan Cohen QC, the House of Lords, the Elders, the BBC World Service Trust, Demos and the Foreign Policy Centre.

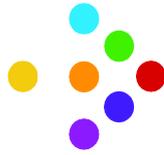
DISCUSSION FOCUS

The forum focused on three principal themes. The first theme was to examine how best to promote prevention and mitigate the impact of child and forced marriage, the second was to assess how to provide support to victims and those at risk to escape and rebuild their lives and the final theme was to explore the broader development impact of prioritising the eradication of child and forced marriage as part of the UK's wider foreign policy engagement.

BACKGROUND

UNICEF estimates that globally, 64 million women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married or in a union before the age of 18. In Bangladesh, Chad and Niger over 33 per cent of women in this age range were married by the age of 15¹. Research conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women suggests that the prevalence of child marriage is highest in the regions of West and East Africa and South Asia. Yet, child and forced marriage is not simply a female phenomenon but transcends national boundaries in low income countries where the fight against poverty and inequality is most visible. While the majority of victims who suffer from child and forced marriage are female, boys and young men are also at risk. The UK

¹ UNICEF (2011) The State of the World's Children - Adolescence: An age of opportunity UNICEF, http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/pdfs/SOWC-2011-Main-Report_EN_02092011.pdf

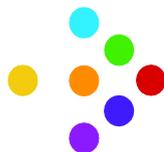


Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office have established a dedicated team of experts called the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU). The Unit provides support to victims as well as training and guidance to professionals. In 2010, 86% of the 1,735 cases dealt with by the FMU were female and 14% were male. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of instances involving male victims dealt with by the FMU helpline increased by a staggering 65%.

KEY POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevention and mitigation

- The UK Government should shift its focus from supporting young people affected by child and forced marriage to ensure that it directly **addresses the drivers and causes of the practice** and invests in preventative measures. In particular it should take measures to increase the proportion of parents who would rather their daughters/sons complete their education before marriage.
- The UK Government should champion greater co-ordination across government for eradicating child and forced marriage by providing the necessary resource support to **promote public awareness and ensure frontline professionals in statutory services** (e.g. the police, schools, healthcare workers, social and welfare services, court services and local authorities) **have access to appropriate and adequate training**.
- The UK Government should do more to **promote innovative ways to employ media and communications to eradicate child and forced marriage, both in the UK and overseas**. For example, in 2005 the BBC World Service Trust launched Afghan Women's Hour; a weekly programme broadcast on BBC World Service Radio in Dari and Pashto. The programme was cancelled when project funding came to an end despite the broadcast's growing popularity among both Afghan men and women.
- The UK Government should do more to **support joint working between grassroots organisations, both in the UK and overseas**, as they represent important vehicles to develop community programmes through dialogue and action. This support is essential to engage with national governments, as duty bearers, with ultimate responsibility for enforcing children's rights.
- The **provision and expansion of monitoring and reporting services are critical for implementing robust legal protection and collating reliable data** to combat child and forced marriage in the UK. Examples include: promoting access to facilities for birth registration, identifying more effective ways to ensure UK forced marriage protection orders provide safety and security for victims, monitoring school drop-out rates, particularly among girls who fall pregnant, improved tracking of forced marriage cases known to the authorities.
- In the global fight to combat child and forced marriage, the UK Government could demonstrate greater legitimacy, credibility and leadership **by raising the legal age of marriage in England and Wales from 16 to 18**. This would comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which defines those under the age of 18 as children. In addition, they should collect and publish data (disaggregated by age and gender) on the numbers of young people in the UK who marry before the age of 18.
- The UK Government should recognise the important **monitoring and reporting role of statutory services**, including the role of teachers, medical professionals, the police and social services, and increase their work to build capacity in these services. They should consider making it mandatory for professionals working in statutory services to report suspected cases of early or forced marriage.



- The UK Government should **proactively consult young men and women in the UK and developing countries**, particularly those at risk of or who have experienced early or forced marriage, to harness their insights in seeking practical solutions to the issues they face.

Providing support to victims

- Policy-makers across the UK Government need **a better understanding of the complex and diverse causes of vulnerability and inequality that lead to child and forced marriage**. For example, the drivers (e.g. fragility, food insecurity, poverty) of child and forced marriage in states or regions affected by conflict may not be the same as drivers in states or regions where there are unbalanced gender ratios (the number of boys for every girl). What is often perceived to be an aspect of cultural practice is all too often a survival mechanism imposed by a host of economic constraints.
- The UK Government should use UKAID and its international influence to **ensure that girls and boys married early have equal access to justice and support services as is the case with other victims of sexual violence**. In particular, they should work to reduce the length of time it takes a boy or girl that has experienced forced marriage to annul their union and access legal redress.
- It is critical to **dispel the misconception that child and forced marriage only affects girls and young women, all too often boys and young men are victims too**. A greater understanding needs to be developed, exploring the role of boys and men in tackling this issue.
- The UK Government should **improve their monitoring of the situation of young men and women returned by government agencies** to their families following an early marriage to ensure that they are not mistreated and do not become repeat victims.

Prioritising child and forced marriage as part of the UK's wider foreign policy engagement

- **The role of the UK Violence Against Women Champion should be elevated to Cabinet level** in order to provide the political, institutional and organisational leadership needed to prioritise child and forced marriage and advocate for change on a national and global scale (looking beyond a case by case approach). The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) and the Council of Europe summits present important international platforms in this regard.
- The UK Government needs to **recognise that the fight to combat child and forced marriage might produce greater results if networks and alliances are built not solely on the basis of values, but on an agenda for practical action which could use UK aid budgets to piggyback on popular themes**. The human rights and access to justice frameworks are not the only platforms from which to tackle child and forced marriage issues. Additional entry points include: youth issues, improving access to sexual and reproductive healthcare (as child birth is the leading cause of death amongst girls aged 15-18), tackling the challenge of abandoned spouses, providing incentives to improve access to education for girls and young women and more broadly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are just a few examples of additional effective entry points to address the challenge of child and forced marriage.
- The UK Government should give greater priority **to harmonising and strengthening national and global formal legal agreements and frameworks to protect against child and forced marriage** by building networks and alliances in multilateral institutions, such as the Commonwealth (where common law systems are shared). They should work bilaterally, particularly with recipients of UKAID, and through multilaterals to encourage all governments to implement legal frameworks that formalise systems to protect young people in-country and to return those who are unwillingly transported across their borders.