



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 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/BME 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 BME/global majority women's organizations.

WHAT IS POLYGAMY

Polygamy refers to the practice of having more than one spouse at the same time. The most common form is polygyny, in which a man has more than one wife.

Though far less common, it is worth noting that polyandry, where a woman has multiple husbands, also exists in some societies. However, Polygyny is geographically widespread, with notable prevalence in parts of Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean.

While the rationale behind polygyny has traditionally been framed in some societies as providing women with social or economic protection, however, it can also manifest as a harmful practice that reinforces patriarchal structures within families.

Polygamy is illegal in the UK and may conflict with international human-rights standards on consent and equality between spouses (1). Research links polygyny to higher rates of intimate partner violence within the polygamous household. It can also negatively affect children, creating environments of instability, inequality, and emotional harm.



CONSENT AND COERCION IN POLYGyny: BLURRED BOUNDARY

Where polygyny is presented as a consensual choice, polygyny can manifest into power imbalances and undermine women's dignity and position in the family. Research by the World Health Organisation (WHO) has shown that women in polygynous marriages are 2.25 times more likely to experience depression compared to women in monogamous marriages, reflecting the emotional and psychological strain often associated with such arrangements (2).

Some women may initially accept polygyny but later find it difficult to leave, while others are entered into it without the other wife or wives' consent. This can result in isolation, coercion, and emotional harm for women in different positions within the marriage.

Polygamy can be othered and framed through racialised stereotypes, but evidence also shows that it is a discriminatory marriage practice that increases women's exposure to harm.

Polygamy can occur when men bring wives from countries where it is legal, or through unregistered religious marriages such as *nikah* (3) ceremonies. The practice is sometimes linked to *nikah* marriages within some Muslim communities.

Women in the community who are widowed, financially vulnerable, or socially isolated may enter polygamous marriages due to societal pressure or the stigma of singlehood.

Non-consensual polygamy includes forced marriages, child marriages, and situations involving coercion through financial dependence and can over-lap with 'honour based abuse, family or societal pressure, or immigration-related vulnerability.

WARNING SIGNS AND INDICATORS INCLUDE BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

- Coercion or pressure to enter a polygamous marriage, sometimes through deception (e.g. promises of a better life, or hiding an existing wife), often linked with increased risk of intimate partner violence.
- Unregistered religious marriages (e.g. *nikah*), leaving women with no legal rights or protections.
- Exploitation of migrant women brought to the UK under the promise of marriage.
- Financial abuse, including denial of inheritance, property, or maintenance rights.
- Housing insecurity and sometimes loss of housing autonomy, when an abusive partner brings another wife into the home, even when the property is in the woman's name and undermining her security and rights.
- Minimising or justifying polygamy and abuse on religious grounds, and invoking scripture or faith to silence or control the woman
- Household conflict and strain, as the presence of another wife and her children can create tension, impacting women and children within the home.
- Emotional and psychological harm, including rejection, isolation, and conflict between co-wives.
- Harmful impact on children, including instability, neglect, and emotional distress.

HPSP FACT SHEET

POLYGAMY



TRIGGERS

- Abuse within polygamous relationships can begin or escalate when perpetrators seek to maintain control, enforce patriarchal entitlement, or when women are seen as challenging family, cultural, or religious expectations. Examples include:
- Refusing to agree to a polygamous marriage.
- Objecting to her husband taking another wife.
- Discovering deception/fraud, for example, finding out her husband has another wife in the UK or overseas.
- Seeking legal recognition of her marriage or questioning her lack of rights in an unregistered (*nikah*) marriage.
- Challenging the use of religious scripture or cultural justifications used to legitimise polygamy.
- Being unable to bear children and facing pressure from a husband who claims a 'right' to marry again.
- Trying to assert property, inheritance, or housing rights particularly if another wife (and her children) is brought into the home.
- Raising concerns about financial abuse or lack of support for herself and her children.
- Attempts to leave the marriage, looking for separation or divorce or access external support.
- Speaking out about her situation, which may be seen as bringing 'shame' on the family or community, and can trigger 'honour'-based abuse.

DO'S AND DON'TS

DO:

- Follow the "One Chance Rule", you may have only one safe opportunity to speak to the woman.
- Ensure you see the woman alone, without her husband, family, or co-wives present.
- Be trauma-informed in your approach and led by survivors, recognising them as experts by experience.
- Take disclosures seriously and be patient in understanding the dynamics of power, coercion, and control in polygamous marriages.
- Recognise that there may be multiple perpetrators, including in-laws and extended family.
- Believe the woman and prioritise her safety at all times.
- Use professional interpreting services if needed; never rely on family members, community leaders, or co-wives or her family.
- Establish safe and confidential means of contact.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how faith, culture, or tradition can be weaponised to justify polygamy.
- Validate the victim/survivor's experiences of coercion, abuse, and exploitation as part of power and control.
- Explore the impact on her children and any other children in the household, and ensure they are offered specialist support.

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- If under 18, follow child safeguarding procedures.
- If over 18, follow adult safeguarding procedures.
- If over 16 and high risk, consider a MARAC referral.
- **In an emergency, dial 999.**
- **Offer or signpost to specialist by and for services that understand the issue.**
- **Record and store information carefully and confidentially to prevent further risk.**

DON'T:

- Attempt to mediate between the woman, her husband, or family members.
- Inform the family, community, social network, or religious leaders about her disclosure.
- Meet in a place where family or community members could see you together.
- Assume she is aware of her legal rights or marital status under UK law.
- Send her away without offering support or referrals.
- Use family members, community leaders, or co-wives to interpret.
- Dismiss or minimise her experiences by framing polygamy as a cultural or religious “choice.”
- Respond with shock or disbelief – this risks ‘othering’ her experience.
- Underestimate the role of multiple perpetrators (husband, co-wives, extended family, in-laws).
- Underestimate the risk, even if there have been no previous reports.
- Overlook children, consider support for them.

AGENCIES

You can refer cases and enquire about training on harmful practices via your local P&ACT Ending Harmful Practices Agencies:

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

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

BAWSO (Wales), Helpline (24/7): 0800 731 8147, Email: info@bawso.org.uk

DVIP - Kensington & Chelsea, Kingston upon Thames, Lambeth & Wandsworth
Email: DVIP.al-aman@richmondfellowship.org.uk Phone: 020 8563 2250

FORWARD - Croydon, Bexley, Greenwich & Merton
Email: forward@forwarduk.org.uk Phone: 0208 960 4000

Galop: 0800 999 5428

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

IMECE - Barking & Dagenham, Hackney, Islington, Lewisham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets & Waltham Forest
Email: vawgreferral@imece.org.uk Phone: 0207 354 1959

Jewish Women's Aid Helpline: 0808 801 0500

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AGENCIES

Karma Nirvana: Helpline (UK): 0800 5999 247, Email: info@karmanirvana.org.uk

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

MEWSO (Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation) Email: office@mewso.org, Phone: 07780 983 152

Muslim Women's Network Helpline: 0800 999 5786

Muslim Women Advisory Council: www.mwacuk.org

Restored: www.restored-uk.org

Sikh Women's Aid: 0333 090 1220

Southall Black Sisters - Ealing, Hillingdon & Hounslow Email: info@southallblacksisters.co.uk Phone: 020 8571 9595

Women and Girls Network - Bromley, Ealing & Hounslow Email: rcc@wgn.org.uk Phone: 0808 801 0660

Phoenix (P&ACT) Project at PLIAS Resettlement - Barnet, Brent, H&F, Harrow & Ealing Email: shirley.ricketts@plias.co.uk Phone: 07494 091586 or 0208 838 6800

Midaye - H&F, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster Email: contact@midaye.org.uk Phone: 07593440944

FURTHER INFORMATION

MEWSo & University of Greenwich: Polygamy Matters Report (2025)

https://www.mewso.org/_files/ugd/d9a42c_c39bc747d52640479fc77dce4a587477.pdf?index=true

REFERENCES

1 UDHR Article 16; ICCPR Article 23

2 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34903212/>

3 Nikah is the Islamic religious marriage contract conducted under Islamic tradition. In the UK, a nikah alone is not legally recognised unless it is accompanied by a civil marriage ceremony. Although carrying religious significance, a nikah alone is not recognised under British law, leaving women without legal protection, a gap that can be exploited by abusive partners.