

Reports of 'honour-based' abuse increased following lockdowns and change to police recording rules

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Citation:

BHANBHRO, Sadiq (2023). Reports of 'honour-based' abuse increased following lockdowns and change to police recording rules. The Conversation. [Article]

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Reports of 'honour-based' abuse increased following lockdowns and change to police recording rules

Published: November 29, 2023 12.50pm GMT

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.uydq9sxnn>

<https://theconversation.com/reports-of-honour-based-abuse-increased-following-lockdowns-and-change-to-police-recording-rules-214512>

Cases of so-called honour-based abuse (HBA) are on the rise in England and Wales.

Home Office figures show 2,905 HBA offences in 2022-23 – an increase of 1% in the year ending March 2023 from the year before. This is a rise of 10% since 2020-21.

It has been mandatory for police in England and Wales to record crimes often referred to as “honour-based” since 2019. Between 2016 and 2020, the number recorded rose by 81%.

This mandatory reporting may be behind some of the increase in offences. But the pandemic lockdowns also provided abusers with greater opportunity to offend. What's more, there may be many cases of HBA that go unreported.

There are a variety of harmful practices categorised as HBA. These include forced marriages, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, female genital mutilation, and honour killings. These crimes are committed by people seeking to defend or restore the honour of a person or social group, such as a family, clan, caste, kin group or community.

A global issue

It is a global issue happening across different cultures and communities, although some areas are considered more affected, such as the Middle East and south Asia.

While such crimes can affect anyone, women and girls are more likely to be targeted. In the UK, it is particularly prevalent among young girls. In 2022, the Forced Marriage Unit handled 302 cases: 78% of the victims were female, while 22% were male. Over half of the victims were 21 or younger.

My research with communities in the UK and abroad indicates that the ideology that triggers this harmful behaviour towards family members is that women and girls are considered carriers of family honour, and a precious social resource.

Given the social, cultural and economic value of family honour that lies with women and girls, social groups have rules and practices to protect the value they have placed in honour.

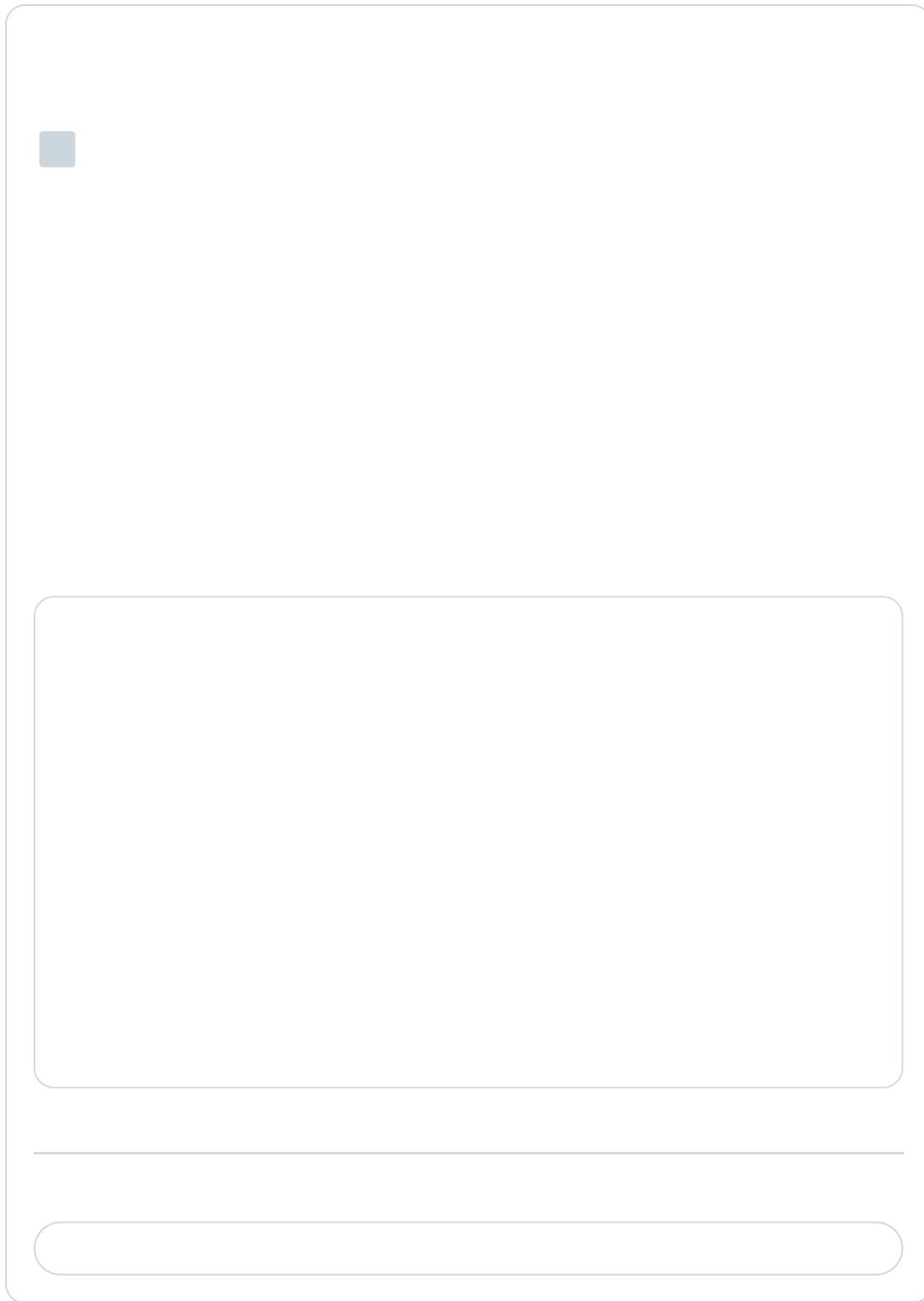
For example, if a young woman marries without her family or parents' consent, this act would be considered dishonourable for the family. This young woman's behaviour can trigger gossip about her family's reputation, showing that the family is exposed to dishonour and shame in its concerned social group. As a result, the family, particularly the male members, will attempt to restore the family honour.

The actions and behaviour taken to protect or restore family honour in this way are context-specific. The action could range from a harsh warning to murder, and any harmful behaviour in between, such as threatening, stalking, harassing or forcing her to leave her husband.

Impact of lockdown

However, this type of crime is often not reported to authorities because victims hesitate to come forward. HBA thrives in secrecy and fear. The COVID-19 lockdowns and associated restrictions created an environment which made it easier for perpetrators to commit offences and more difficult for survivors to seek help.

The national helpline for HBA saw a significant decline in calls about forced marriage following the government's order to stay home on March 23 2020. The helpline saw a peak in contacts in May 2020, following the easing of some restrictions – and another rise when schools reopened in September 2020.



The number of reported cases has also increased because of the implementation of official recording methods, which has slightly improved its visibility. The [murder of Banaz Mahmood](#) in 2006 drew attention to honour crimes in the UK, and there has been a gradual increase in the awareness of these offences.

But political cultural sensitivities may be getting in the way of tackling HBA. For example, it has been alleged that the [Crown Prosecution Service](#) may have avoided tackling such crimes for fear of creating “unrest” in communities.

Similarly, police may have been nervous about investigating sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities for fear of being labelled racist.

The UK parliament's Women and Equalities Committee recently carried out an inquiry into so-called honour-based abuse, reviewing evidence submitted by several witnesses and experts, including myself. The committee called for the creation of a legal definition of HBA.

A shared, statutory definition would increase awareness and also reduce the hypersensitivity attached to HBA that frames it as a cultural problem of certain communities, which often prevents state agencies from acting and prosecuting such violent crimes.

Additionally, a legal definition for HBA would contribute to social and professional understanding, help to improve data collection and ultimately assist in bringing more perpetrators to justice.

The government has rejected the committee's recommendation for a statutory definition of HBA, however. This is a missed opportunity to take a decisive step forward in the fight against this kind of crime.