



KARMA NIRVANA

Supporting victims of honour-based abuse
and forced marriage

**THE FIVE
FOUNDATION**

London, March 2 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

Child marriage is often viewed as an issue for the developing world and one that exclusively takes place overseas. The reality is that it is happening in every single part of the UK, but is hidden in plain sight.

Ahead of International Women's Day, Karma Nirvana and The Five Foundation are [launching a new campaign](#), asking the UK government to ban child marriage completely within the next 60 days. We hope you will personally prioritise this as a matter of urgency.

Over a ten year period leading up to 2016 the Office of National Statistics showed that in excess of 3,300 marriages in England and Wales involved children. The majority of these were girls.

In 2021, it is still perfectly legal for 16 and 17 year olds to be married with "parental consent", although, in practice, parental coercion is far more likely and girls are prepared from a young age to believe that this is something they should aspire towards.

On top of this, religious or customary marriages can take place at any age - sometimes as young as 10 years old. There is currently no law whatsoever against this, and there is no way of knowing how many of these supposed marriages are taking place, since no records are collected in the UK.

There is sometimes confusion in relation to what is or isn't a "forced marriage" in the legal sense. While a child marriage could also be a forced marriage, it is not always the case. The law does not recognise age as a standalone factor in determining lack of capacity to consent. As such, children are not automatically considered to be unable to agree to marriage. We have many laws in this country to protect children, such as remaining in education or training until 18 and not being able to buy cigarettes or use sunbeds, we are completely failing to protect some vulnerable children from the harms of child marriage.

The current law also severely undermines the government's international work to end child marriage. This is not only causing damage at home. We have seen instances such as in Bangladesh when the age of marriage was lowered from 18 to 16, government ministers publicly stated that "it's legal in the UK, so why not here".

The government needs to [immediately close these loopholes](#), which are causing untold harm to British girls, but which are also making it so much harder for groups such as

Karma Nirvana, which supports victims of honour based abuse, The Five Foundation, the Global Partnership To End FGM, and Girls Not Brides, the Global Partnership To End Child Marriage, to work internationally to end these and other related forms of violence against girls.

Our collective experience shows that it should never be assumed that children can consent to marriage either legally, or as a religious or customary ritual. We need to get our own house in order if we are to continue to claim to lead these efforts at international level.

Yours sincerely,

Natasha Rattu, Executive Director of [Karma Nirvana](#) and Nimco Ali OBE, CEO of [The Five Foundation, The Global Partnership To End FGM](#).

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