



## Coaction Hub Harmful Practices Guide for MARAC Reps

### The purpose of this guidance

This guidance focuses on harmful practices cases heard at MARAC and is aimed at any practitioner who attends MARAC. It is not a general guidance on MARAC but will explore how harmful practices cases may present at MARAC and what agencies can do to minimise the risks to survivors and their children.

### What are harmful practices and what is the relevance to MARAC?

Harmful practices are forms of gender-based violence and domestic abuse where escalation of abuse and associated risks happen due to notions of power and control within intersectional contexts of oppression. 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. While harmful practices are perpetrated disproportionately and primarily against women and girls, men, other genders, and gender non-conforming persons can also be victims. Harmful practices can be experienced by people across a range of ethnicities and religious backgrounds, including those with no religion.

### Harmful practices include, but are not limited to:

Forced Marriage	Child marriage
So called 'honour' based abuse (HBA)	Female genital mutilation (FGM)
Virginity testing and hymenoplasty	Coercive reproduction
Spiritual abuse	Child abuse linked to faith
Bride price and dowry-related violence	Female infanticide
So called 'corrective rape'	Acid attacks
Caste based abuse	Conversion therapy

Although we do not have reliable data on the numbers of harmful practices cases being heard at MARAC, estimates put this at approximately 5% of MARAC cases or 3000 per year in England and Wales<sup>[i]</sup>. In our research surveying 50 MARAC co-ordinators in England and Wales, 76% of co-ordinators stated that they hear harmful practices cases as least sometimes, with 29% hearing them regularly or very regularly.

[i] Bates, Lis (2017). Honour-based Abuse in England and Wales: Who Does What to Whom? PhD thesis. University of Bristol.

## What these cases may look like

As part of STADA's data collection project with the Harmful Practices Operational Group in the boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham, Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea, data was collected on 4 years of harmful practices cases heard at MARAC [2]. From this data, the most prevalent forms of harmful practices cases being heard at these MARACs were 'honour'-based abuse (82%) and forced marriage (27%). Other forms of harmful practice were identified in much smaller numbers: FGM (6%), faith based or spiritual abuse (4%), acid attacks (4%), dowry related abuse (0.8%) and virginity testing (0.4%). As harmful practices tend to be extremely hidden forms of abuse, it is unknown whether these numbers are accurate reflections of high-risk cases in these areas. There is also a question over whether these forms of abuse, particularly those lesser understood, are being identified.

One of the findings from the research was the clear overlap between harmful practices and domestic abuse. The majority of victims of harmful practices were also experiencing domestic abuse, and in some cases victim/ survivors were experiencing multiple forms of harmful practices, as well as other forms of abuse. An additional complexity to these cases is that harmful practices cases are much more likely than domestic abuse cases to feature multiple perpetrators [3]. In the STADA data 65% of victim/ survivors were at risk from multiple perpetrators. In some of these cases victim/ survivors were experiencing different, although interlinked forms of abuse from different perpetrators, for example domestic abuse from a partner or ex-partner as well as forced marriage or 'honour' based abuse from family members. Additional barriers seen in some of these cases included victim/ survivors having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), and English language barriers.

## Risk assessing these cases

When considering these cases, agencies should be aware that most standard risk assessment tools used to assess domestic abuse were not designed for the complexities of harmful practices cases. Therefore, victim/ survivors will not necessarily score as high risk and professional judgement is required when referring these cases to MARAC. Professional curiosity is essential to be able to assess risk beyond standard risk assessment tools, and assumptions based on a victim/ survivor's ethnicity or religion should be avoided.

Practitioners should keep in mind the 'one chance' rule. This may be the only opportunity to speak to the victim/ survivor - so if it is safe to do so to ask questions to ascertain the risk, and to safety plan. It is important to note that cases of 'honour' based abuse do not necessarily follow the trajectory of escalation in domestic abuse cases, and can escalate quickly, seemingly without an extensive history of physical violence. This is because they often involve high levels of coercive control which may be invisible to those outside the situation but can escalate once the control is challenged, usually by stepping outside the bounds of what is considered 'acceptable' behaviour.

[2] Richards, F and Dube Lacroix, M (2023) Harmful Practices Cases at Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham and Kensington and Chelsea MARACs: What Does the Data Tell Us?

[3] Her Majesty's Government (2014). The Right to Choose: Multi-Agency Practice Guidelines: Handling cases of forced marriage. London: Cabinet Office.

## Agencies should be considering:

- Asking victim/ survivors additional questions around forced marriage, 'honour' based abuse, FGM and other forms of harmful practices.
- If the victim/ survivor is experiencing coercive control find out what is it they are restricted from doing, and what the motivations are around this
- Explore whether there have been any triggers to abuse escalating, or being likely to escalate e.g. refusing a marriage, breaking 'rules', being seen with a partner, becoming pregnant outside of marriage etc
- Explore whether there are multiple perpetrators and if so, who they are and where they are (including if some are abroad)
- Explore whether anyone else might be at risk. If there is a forced marriage risk are there siblings who may also be at risk? If the victim/ survivor is in a relationship which is not approved of, is the partner also at risk? Have other members of the family experienced similar abuse and what was the extent of this?
- Consider need as well as risk e.g., has the abuse or risk of abuse created health or housing issues which require support?
- Explore intersecting risks, for example, consider additional factors which may escalate risk such as the victim/ survivor's sexuality or gender identity or the weaponization of factors such as their immigration status or faith. Consideration may need to be given to how agency responses could cause other risks, such as housing a victim/ survivor in an area where they may be more likely to experience racism.

If it is not possible to ascertain this information, or you are unclear whether there are multiple perpetrators, this should be flagged in your MARAC referral or information sharing so other agencies can be aware.

## Information sharing

As with all MARAC cases, information shared at MARAC on these cases should be accurate, relevant and proportionate. Harmful practices are often 'hidden' forms of abuse, so in some cases there may be limited information as to what form the abuse is taking and who is perpetrating it. It is therefore important to share any information which is relevant and proportionate as this will help build a picture of what may be occurring. Examples of relevant information would include:

- Previous history of harmful practices (including towards other family members).
- Whether the victim/ survivor may be seen to have transgressed what is considered 'accepted behaviour'.
- The different forms of abuse occurring (if more than one).
- Any risk of the victim/ survivor or children being removed from the country.
- Any barriers to the victim/ survivor seeking support e.g. language barriers, insecure immigration.
- Pressures from family or community not to disclose.
- if there is more than one perpetrator and if so who and where they are.
- Whether anyone else in the household or family is at risk or has experienced abuse.
- How the victim/ survivor views the abuse, and what they would like to happen.

## **Actions your agency can take**

A referral to MARAC will mean that all agencies will share information and create an action plan together. However, remembering the 'one chance rule', referring agencies should be considering what actions can be taken prior to MARAC. In the data collection project in 3 London boroughs referenced above, there were many cases where actions set to explore the risk after MARAC were not completed as the victim/ survivor was no longer engaged with the service. All practitioners within your agencies should be aware of the 'one chance rule' - that there might only be one chance to speak to a potential victim and, therefore, one chance to save a life.

We would encourage agencies to explore the availability of harmful practices training in their area and to support their colleagues to attend so they are better equipped to understand these cases. It is also crucial that professionals are aware of the specialist agencies they can offer referrals to. In some areas this may be specialist by and for organisations who are specifically funded such as Savera in Merseyside or the P&ACT project agencies in London. In other areas this might be a specialist worker or domestic abuse agency who work with these cases. If there are no specialist agencies, helplines such as the Karma Nirvana helpline: 0800 5999 247 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm) or Forced Marriage Unit: 02070080151 could be given out, if safe. Some of these agencies may attend MARAC and this is an opportunity to build stronger links with these specialists.

Most importantly, the complexity of these cases and the risk of escalation mean that agencies should give particular consideration to how they maintain confidentiality. Actions such as speaking to family members or using inappropriate interpreters could escalate the risk to the victim/ survivor, as could meetings such as family group conferences. Agencies and MARACs should give consideration to how case notes and minutes are shielded, particularly if there are any family members or associates working for statutory or non-statutory agencies locally.

For more information on harmful practices, please see the factsheets in our toolkit