

Recognising 'Perceived shame'

For some communities and groups, the concept of 'honour' is prized above the safety and wellbeing of individuals. To compromise a family's or communities 'honour' is to bring 'perceived' dishonour and shame, which can have severe consequences, and used to justify domestic abuse, honour-based abuse, disownment, and in some cases, even honour killing (Karma Nirvana, 2023).

What is considered honourable can vary significantly across cultures and may include fulfilling traditional roles such as supporting the family and men in authority. Gender role expectations also differ significantly among ethnic groups and cultures, meaning what is considered honourable for men and women is not uniform across society (Uskul, A.K, et al, 2022) An example of this is men accessing higher education in a field that may be chosen by their family and women deterred from accessing higher education due to gender-based discrimination as this does not follow traditional roles of a future wife and mother.

Definition of Shame (Harmful Practices): 'Shame is a feeling of embarrassment or humiliation that arises from the perception of having done something dishonourable, immoral, or improper.' (Cuncic, A., 2021) In the context of Harmful practices this also includes the perceived shame by family, friends and the community.

Spotting signs of 'Perceived shame'

- Divorce - In some cultural or religious concepts divorce is seen as a failure to uphold a lifelong marriage. The breakdown of a marriage can be viewed as a failure by a family or community and potentially impact their social standing or reputation (Stefano, 2023).
- Sex/relationships before marriage - Sexual purity is considered to be the responsibility of male relatives and then a future husband. A women's chastity is linked to her family's honour and can lead to severe consequences for women perceived as not being 'pure' before marriage (Christianson, M., Teiler, Å. and Eriksson, C., 2020). What can impact a women's purity? This can range from conversing with other men, having an affair or even experiencing rape/sexual assault.
- Rape and Sexual assault – An unwanted sexual experience impacts both men and women and comes with the stigma of shame, including child sexual abuse and recent/non-recent in adulthood. Rape and sexual assault can be perceived as shameful by a family or community as they may link this with loss of virginity or sex outside of marriage, although it is unwanted, and may also not recognised rape within marriage as a criminal act. They may question the victim/survivor's sexuality depending on the gender of the perpetrator.
- Loss of virginity - The virginity test is the process of determining whether a girl or woman is a virgin, deciding that she has never engaged in, or been subjected to, sexual intercourse (Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation). In honour-based patriarchal societies, young girls and women are expected to remain virgins until marriage. This belief places intense pressure on girls and women to conform to strict codes of sexual behaviour, often enforced through surveillance, control, and fear. If a woman is suspected of engaging in premarital sex, been a victim of rape/sexual assault or even perceived as behaving as "improper", she may become the target of honour-based abuse, including threats, violence, or forced marriage. Such abuse stems from the idea that a family's reputation depends on a woman's chastity, rather than her rights, autonomy, or well-being (Gorar, 2021).

- Virginity testing- Virginity testing and hymenoplasty was made illegal in the UK as part of the Health and Care Act 2022. “Virginity testing” means the examination of female genitalia, with or without consent, for the purpose (or purported purpose) of determining virginity (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025). In the United Kingdom it is illegal to carry out, offer or aid and abet virginity testing to hymenoplasty within the UK and outside the UK and is a national or habitually resident of England and Wales. Women and girls are often coerced, forced, shamed and pressured into undergoing these procedures in the name of upholding honour and to fulfil the requirement of proving they’re ‘pure’ before marriage. Women who ‘fail’ a virginity test are found to have undergone hymen reconstruction before marriage or bleed tested on their wedding night. ‘Failing’ can have severe consequences, for girls and women and can result in violence, sexual assault, unable to marry, rejection from the family, banishment from the community, or being killed (Gov.UK., n.d.)
- Sexuality - Honour based abuse and forced marriage against LGBT+ people happens when family/community members disapprove of a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Anti-LGBT+ honour-based abuse/forced marriage happens in all cultures, nationalities, faith groups and communities. Both men and women are at risk due to their sexuality. Families may forcibly marry their LGBT+ children if they suspect or aware of their sexuality in order to conceal this from the wider community and ensure they conform to gender norms. On the other hand, LGBT+ people may conform to heterosexual marriages in order to hide their own sexuality and to keep themselves safe (Galop, 2025)
- Inter-faith Relationships – “An inter-faith marriage is a marriage between two people who belong to different religious or faiths” This can involve a marriage between Christian and Muslim and Jewish and Hindu, among other combinations. Inter-faith relationships and its acceptance varies by culture, community, societal pressures and family views (Yahya, S. and Boag, S., 2014). Women are at more risk of honour-based abuse and forced marriage if a family or community suspect or aware of an inter-faith relationship. In Islam, interfaith marriage is permitted for Muslim men with non-Muslim women but restricted for Muslim women. A Muslim man may marry a Christian or Jewish woman (‘a person of the book’), but a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man. This surrounds the social and cultural context which favours a husband’s religion and their duty to raise their children as under their religion (Elmail-Karakaya, A., 2022).
- Love Marriage – A love marriage involves individuals who choose their own partner based on love, affection and personal connection, rather than through an arranged marriage or familial or societal pressures (Imperial Matrimonial, 2024). A love marriage could be a risk to those who have refused an arranged marriage, the family/community do not approve of the love marriage and cross-cultural challenges related to customs, family expectations and beliefs.

Banaz Mahmood story is an example of an Honour-based killing involving a love relationship and forced marriage. Banaz was killed by her family because she ended an abusive forced marriage and started a relationship with someone of her own choosing. Someone she loved.

- Refusing an arranged marriage—Forced marriage affects a wide range of communities, including South Asian, Irish Traveller, Turkish, Roma, Afghan, South Asian, Kurdish, Iranian, Arab and African communities. There are no religions which support or advocate the

practice of forced marriage (Rights of women, 2024). Parents may look at a range of factors when selecting a partner such as preserving wealth, land or property, family reputation, caste, immigration, controlling unwanted behaviour and sexuality or promising their child when they were young and more. Rejecting a marriage is perceived as shameful as it may impact the family's reputation and can also impact other sibling marriages. Many victims are subject to emotional blackmail and physical threats. Several of them may be forced to marry a member of their extended family, for example, a cousin.

- Disability - Research and evidence from practice tells us that children and adults with disabilities are more likely to experience abuse compared to non-disabled children and adults (Davis, 2019). Disabled children and adults are also at risk of experiencing harmful practices, and face broader vulnerabilities. Disabled adults are more likely to experience abuse from a wider range of perpetrators due to having more frequent contact with health and social care settings and being more dependent on others (Public Health England, 2015). Families and communities may perceive shame upon their disabled children/adults if they are unable to follow traditional gender roles and expectations, such as getting married, having children, looking after elders/home and providing financial security. Some key motives for forced marriage include:
 - Obtaining a carer for the person with a learning disability or physical,
 - Obtaining assistance for ageing parents,
 - Obtaining financial security for the disabled person,
 - Believing the marriage will somehow cure the disability,
 - Believing marriage is a rite of passage for all,
 - Fear other siblings may be undesirable if disabled children are also not married
 - Marriage being seen as the only or the 'right' option.

(McCarthy et al., 2020)

- Westernisation – 'Westernisation is a process whereby societies come under or adopt what is considered to be Western culture'. For the context of this toolkit and perceptions of shame linked with Western culture this includes areas such as; Education, Lifestyles, Norms and Values, Clothing and Customs. Young people and adults are often criticised by families and communities for being 'too westernised' especially women. This includes wanting to access higher education and have a career, wearing makeup, wearing western clothing (short sleeved, tight fitting, showing skin), interactions and friendships with those outside of their religion/community or those of the opposite sex. Those being seen to adopt western values and culture may be at risk of HBA/FM as a way to control them and stop them from bringing shame upon the family.
- Son Preference – Son preference is often rooted in patriarchal cultural norms that link family honour to male lineage and control over women. Women must also endure the consequences of having a girl which not only impacts their reproductive decisions and health, but can also include direct violence, abandonment, divorce or even death (UN Women, 2011). In other contexts, daughters may be seen as burdens or liabilities, while sons are valued for carrying on the family name and status. This imbalance can lead to honour-based abuse, where girls and women are punished, sometimes through physical abuse and control for behaviour perceived as bringing shame to the family. The preference for sons

reinforces the devaluing of girls, increasing their vulnerability to neglect, forced marriage, and other forms of coercive control.

- Higher Education – Accessing higher education can be a cause for honour-based abuse in families or communities that view female independence as a threat to traditional gender roles. Some girls and young women may face restrictions, threats, or violence for pursuing education, especially if it involves leaving home, interacting with men, or impacting marriage and domestic roles. By controlling access to higher education this maintains family "honour" by limiting autonomy and enforcing control (Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024). On the other hand, men may face familial pressure to abandon their educational aspirations in order to fulfil family expectations in a field of their choosing to provide financial security or class elevation.
- Reporting to police/professionals – Reporting or speaking up about abuse or familial issues can be very complex and dangerous for men and women. It is seen as shameful as these topics are taboo and there are expectations that this is a family/community issue that must not be shared outside of this group. By alerting external parties' victims may fear retaliation, escalation, ostracism, or further violence if they come forward. In some cases, entire families and communities may collude to protect the perpetrators or silence the victim in the name of preserving 'honour'.
- Dowry abuse - Dowries are payments or gifts—often money, goods, or property—given by a bride's family to the groom's family as part of a marriage arrangement (EBSCO, 2024). Though illegal in many countries, the practice persists in some communities and can be a source of significant pressure and abuse. Dowry-related expectations can lead to honour-based abuse, where women are mistreated, coerced, or even harmed if the dowry is considered insufficient. This abuse is often justified under the guise of protecting family honour, reinforcing harmful gender norms and contributing to cycles of violence and control.

Other Perceived shames: Being a reluctant immigration sponsor, objecting to being removed from education, sharing/receiving intimate images, child custody issues, causing 'gossip', rejecting/renouncing religion or religious institution, poor mental health, and pregnancy outside of marriage. Please note this is not an exhaustive list.

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