

What can curriculum contribute to preventing forced marriage?

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Data availability statement

The dataset cannot be shared as it consists of interview and focus group data about sensitive subject matter, including with students under the age of 18. Sharing the data would pose a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of participants and could lead to inadvertent harm.

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In 2020, statutory Relationships, Sexuality and Health Education (RSHE) (DfE, 2021) was mandated in all English secondary schools, requiring schools to educate their students about several forms of gender-based violence, including forced marriage. English schools tend to deliver RSHE within the broader and non-statutory Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education curriculum, which is tailored to meet the needs of pupils and communities (DfE, 2021). Mandating RSHE in England reflects a global trend towards the adoption of accurate, non-judgmental, culturally relevant and age-appropriate teaching about sexuality and relationships, to secure health and developmental benefits during adolescence and beyond (UNESCO, 2015). This global shift warrants celebration and invites critical reflection on whether and how curriculum-centred approaches can work to prevent complex forms of gendered violence. In this article I reflect on whether or how curriculum can facilitate students' understanding of forced marriage within the current English educational context.

According to the UK Home Office, forced marriage is “a marriage conducted without the valid consent of both parties, where duress is a factor” (2000, p. 4). It is a breach of human rights with important negative developmental, relational, and health costs that disproportionately impact girls and women below the age of 25 (UK Home Office, 2000). Taking an intersectional feminist perspective, I conceptualise forced marriage as a complex and contextually situated form of gendered violence driven by multiple intersecting inequalities. Forced marriage is embedded in heteronormative expectations about women's status and marriage, and broader structural inequalities related to race, class, immigration status, and gender (Gangoli et al., 2012; Gill & Anitha, 2012).

In 2021, I commenced a PhD representing a new collaboration between the IOE (UCL's Faculty of Education and Society), and a charity organisation supporting schools to reach statutory requirements related to forced marriage. My doctoral research is informed by several years' experience working across research and practice in international contexts to explore and develop curriculum-based approaches to preventing gendered violence. I conducted research in three London secondary schools (July 2023-February 2024), comprising 28 focus group discussions (46 students in total), and semi-structured interviews with 8 teachers at the time of writing, including Heads of PHSE, PSHE teachers, and teachers with safeguarding and pastoral responsibilities.

Constrictions, contestation and making space for complexity

Two decades of education reform in England prioritising high-stakes accountability has created an educational context that Gewirtz et al., (2021) term 'deliverology': a test-driven

pedagogical culture, narrowing of the curriculum, and reduced space for complexity and contestation. In interviews, teachers painted a picture of prescriptive RSHE lesson plans with limited time for in-depth classroom discussion about forced marriage. One teacher felt compelled to 'teach in a very fire and brimstone way', and suggested the government showed little trust in teachers' capacity to develop their own forced marriage materials. Similarly, in one of few existing studies on forced marriage and education in England, Khan (2023) unearthed teachers' concerns about how to provide nuanced perspectives on forced marriage, whilst also ensuring their lesson content aligned with rigid education policies.

Reduced space for complexity and contestation was also evident in teachers' and students' accounts of classroom discussions. Teachers described their own attempts to use the 'right language' about forced marriage, and imposed guidelines about which opinions were appropriate (or not) for students to share in classroom discussions by 'reiterating expectations' about student behaviour. In research on the promotion of so-called 'British Values' in education, Vincent (2019) found that performative pressures and restrictive curricula can encourage teachers to self-censor or limit classroom conversations. In my focus groups, students similarly described limiting their contributions to classroom discussions about forced marriage and other RSHE content. They feared judgment from their peers and suggested that teachers might misunderstand their contributions or flag certain statements through safeguarding procedures. Asymmetric teacher-student power relations, materialised here through limits on discussion in RSHE, can create barriers for schools to adequately deliver curriculum content about violence, coercion, and consent (Bragg et al., 2021).

In focus group discussions, students exhibited knowledge about forced marriage and some critical engagement with the topic. Teachers, in contrast, felt that students would have learnt little about forced marriage outside of lessons. This may be because deliverology often renders students as objects of measurement and monitoring, limiting possibilities for them to act as agents in the co-creation of educational spaces (Gewirtz et al., 2021). Through encouraging dialogue and reflection about forced marriage in my focus group discussions, student participants drew on a wide range of influences including friends and family, social media, documentaries, and novels. They were surprised and interested by the range of ideas their peers shared during research discussions and reported learning that there are not always right or wrong answers to questions like what constitutes consent and coercion in marriage. Students felt schools could create more opportunities for students to share their perspectives in classrooms through 'more interactive, more talkative' RSHE. My findings reinforce the assertion that positioning students as social agents in schools and

classrooms can facilitate teachers' efforts to support students to understand their entitlement to human rights, including avoiding gendered violence (Robinson, 2017).

Possibilities for change?

In my professional life I repeatedly return to the question of how we can design curricula that enables young people to critically reflect on their own expectations, perspectives, and lived realities as a route to preventing gendered violence. My discussions with students and teachers suggest that in England, deliverology is contributing to content-heavy and didactic forced marriage curriculum guidance. Teachers and students, therefore, have few opportunities and little guidance about how to encourage critical reflection on forms of gendered violence with contested definitions and complex intersecting drivers, like forced marriage. Despite the constraints of the current educational context, as we continue to establish and refine the new statutory RSHE in England, education professionals and policy makers can prioritise curriculum approaches that encourage students' agency and autonomy when learning about forced marriage. This could entail better recognition of students' prior knowledge and experiences, and curriculum design that encourages collaborative and dialogic group learning on complex and contested issues such as forced marriage.

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