

# Background advice note

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 12 August 2025

The purpose of this advice note is to provide background information and advice to help officers and staff:

- identify where 'honour'-based abuse (HBA) may be a factor in crimes or reports they are dealing with
- with the different considerations they will need to think about when investigating HBA

This section should be read before the [HBA advice note for first responders](#) and [HBA advice note for investigators](#).

Police officers and staff are advised to refer back to this section during the course of their investigations.

## What is 'honour'-based abuse?

'Honour'-based abuse (HBA) is an umbrella term that includes any criminal offence that is committed to protect, defend or 'restore' a perceived dishonour, shame or embarrassment.

**Offences** are committed because the suspect perceives the victim has dishonoured them, their family and/or wider community.

For more information go to [Cultural awareness and understanding](#).

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) defines HBA as 'an incident or crime involving violence, threats of violence, intimidation, coercion or abuse (including psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse) which has or may have been committed to protect or defend the 'honour' of an individual, family and/or community from alleged or perceived breaches of the family and/or community's code of behaviour'.

HBA, like **domestic abuse**, often involves a pattern of conduct which is harmful and abusive. It rarely involves just one incident. Victims can also be **coerced or controlled**, be kept against their will at home or taken abroad without their consent (criminal offences in their own right).

HBA can also take place online. HBA is often premeditated and can involve multiple perpetrators working together who show similar behaviour to organised crime groups.

HBA is a fundamental abuse of an individual's human rights and is a way to control and punish victims for their choices, to retrain and restrict them from living their lives and to exercise power and control over them. Offences can take place in the UK, overseas, online and offline. It is important to understand that HBA victims may also not recognise their abuse.

For more information on HBA-related terms, go to [Annex A – Definitions](#).

## Associated offences

All cases of [forced marriage](#) (as opposed to arranged marriages where there is clear and unequivocal consent from both parties) and many cases of [female genital mutilation](#) (FGM) are [associated with HBA](#). Any conduct carried out for the purpose of causing a child to marry before they turn 18 is a criminal offence under the [Marriage and Civil Partnership \(Minimum Age\) Act 2022](#) (even if the child consents to the marriage). Officers should remember that HBA includes a wide range of criminal offences, behaviours and practices.

For further information, go to [Annex B – Other associated offences](#).

## Cultural awareness and understanding

'Honour'-based abuse (HBA) stems from a particular interpretation of cultural or religious beliefs by partners or families who seek to prevent any form of perceived 'dishonour' from happening by individuals who disobey the 'rules'.

Breaking 'rules' or '[honour](#)' codes is used as [motivation](#) for justifying the abuse. This is mainly committed by men, but can often be committed by women too. Cultural and religious beliefs should not be accepted as an excuse for the criminal acts that have been committed.

HBA is rooted in patriarchal beliefs where there are defined roles and expectations for different genders. Women and girls are often viewed as objects or property and are expected to conform to a prescribed set of behaviours. Boys and men can also be victims of HBA, especially when they go against cultural expectations.

HBA affects people from many cultures, nationalities, faith groups and communities so cultural assumptions should not be made. The police service has a responsibility to safeguard and protect victims from all backgrounds, religions and cultures.

- [Go to Home Office. \(2024\). Statistics on so called 'honour-based' abuse offences, England and Wales.](#)

## Collusion

HBA is often committed with some level of approval and/or collusion from wider family, community members and sometimes even professionals who share the same codes of 'honour'.

Individuals may be reluctant to assist with police enquiries due to:

- fear of or pressure from the victim's family
- cultural or religious beliefs
- family associations
- being coerced to side with the suspect

For more advice go to [HBA advice note for investigators.](#)

## Motivation for 'honour'-based abuse (HBA)

The following factors could be used by the suspect to justify to themselves the offences that have been committed. They would not be a justification in law.

- traditional beliefs in purity, marriageability and control of women's sexuality (often linked to [female genital mutilation](#), forced marriage and other forms of HBA)
- protecting family 'honour' (family reputation and standing)
- controlling or 'curing' unwanted behaviour and sexuality (including perceived promiscuity or being lesbian, gay or bisexual) or gender identity
- a response to family, community or peer group pressure regarding perceived dishonour, shame or embarrassment

- strengthening family standing in the community
- protecting perceived cultural and/or religious ideals (including those that are misguided or outdated)
- retaining wealth, property or land within the family, for example through dowry
- assisting claims for residence and citizenship in the UK
- honouring old promises
- expectations for domestic servitude

## Risk factors for 'honour'-based abuse (HBA)

Anything contrary to the family or community 'culture', however minor or seemingly routine, could increase the risk of HBA taking place. Risks could include, but are not limited to the following:

- refusing to marry a person chosen by the family
- [dowry](#)-related (financial) issues
- pregnancy outside of marriage
- disapproved relationships such as inter-faith, inter-caste, inter-cultural, same-sex or outside of marriage
- pre-marital conflict, reporting domestic abuse, attempts to separate/divorce, disputes over child custody
- disabilities
- sexual orientation (including being gay, lesbian, bisexual)
- objection/resistance to being removed from, not excelling in or leaving education
- mental ill health or limited mental capacity
- rejection of religion or religious instruction

- being a victim of rape
- identifying as transgender
- failing to conceive or producing only female children
- expressions of autonomy
- behaviour perceived by the family to be inappropriate such as smoking, dress or make-up, relationships, sexual conduct (including online), truanting
- being a reluctant immigration sponsor

It is important to remember that none of the risks are deserving of abuse.

For further information, go to [Vulnerability-related risk guidelines](#).

## Victims

Women and girls are most often victims of HBA, but boys and men can also be victims.

For more information go to [UK Parliament. \(2023\). So-called honour-based abuse inquiry](#).

Other family members or friends can also become victims if they are perceived to be supporting, defending or protecting the main victim or refusing to conform themselves.

## Warning signs

The following warning signs may indicate HBA is taking place:

- fear of harm, forced marriage, deportation, child abduction
- escalation – threats, violence, restrictions
- reports of [domestic abuse](#)
- absence from school, college or work
- reports of [missing](#) episodes

- anxiety
- depression
- self-harm
- attempted suicide
- suicide in the family
- being subjected to unreasonable restrictions, such as being kept at home by parents/family members, constantly chaperoned or other coercive, controlling behaviours
- family or community members taking the role of interpreter at GP or other appointments
- being abandoned or ostracised by family members
- late disclosure of pregnancy or pregnancy itself
- delay in seeking medical help or not receiving any
- **female genital mutilation**
- being pressured into going abroad
- disclosures that a girl has been taken to a doctor to be examined to see if she is a virgin
- disclosure of hymen repair surgery
- eating disorders

## Barriers to reporting

Barriers to victims reporting can include, but are not limited to:

- communication/language issues
- fear of loss of children
- fear of police or other authorities

- fear of not being believed or understood
- fear of repercussions/retribution from family or community members (including community and religious leaders) for disclosing HBA
- feeling ashamed
- feeling they are to blame for the abuse
- immigration status and threats of deportation
- limited or no access to public funds
- limited or no access to reporting mechanisms
- not wanting to upset, shame or criminalise their family
- not recognising that the abuse is criminal
- previous experiences where there has been a lack of understanding from authorities

Police officers and staff should be aware that victims may be reluctant to talk about the abuse they have experienced. They might minimise what has happened or appear fearful or resistant due to trauma or coercive control.

- [Find out more in ongoing support](#)

## Suspects

It is not unusual for multiple suspects to be involved in HBA. Suspects can include current or former intimate partners, birth family members (such as parents, siblings or cousins), in-laws, members of the community and so called '[bounty hunters](#)'.

Suspects in the community can be [coerced](#) to assist or commit an offence if they have been told or led to believe that a family or community's reputation has been or could be damaged and needs to be restored. Such discussions can take place in 'family counsels', often led by primary suspects.

Family members can also be suspects of HBA if they have incited, assisted or carried out acts of abuse against victims. In some cases, they may be responsible for controlling the behaviour of

younger girls and boys in the family on behalf of the primary suspects.

## Annex A – Definitions

- Arranged marriage – where family members or other individuals select the bride and groom, but the couple themselves are free to choose whether or not to marry.?
- **Breast flattening/ironing** – where pubescent girls' breasts are ironed, massaged, flattened and/or pounded down over a period of time (sometimes years) so that they disappear or do not develop.
- Bounty hunters – individuals tasked with locating or returning someone perceived to have brought dishonour.
- **Dowry** abuse – includes?controlling and coercive behaviour by the husband and/or his family, who pressure, threaten or demand substantial gifts from the woman and her family in the context of the marriage.
- Faith-based or spiritual abuse – abuse linked to faith or belief. It could be caused by a belief in witchcraft, spirit or demonic possession, ritual or satanic abuse features.
- Female genital mutilation – a collective term for a range of procedures where the female genital organs are injured or changed for non-medical reasons. It is sometimes referred to as female circumcision or female genital cutting. The practice is medically unnecessary, is extremely painful and has serious health consequences, both at the time when the mutilation is carried out and in later life.
- Forced marriage – where one or both people do not or cannot consent to the marriage but are forced into it by family or community members. It is automatically classed as a forced marriage if one or both of the concerned parties is under 18 years old. Victims of forced marriage are at a higher risk of being sexually abused or raped.
- Honour (also known as izaatt, namous and sharaf) – protecting family reputation and standing.
- Hymenoplasty – a procedure which is performed to reconstruct a hymen
- One chance rule – you may only have one chance to speak to a potential victim and save a person from serious harm or death.

- Shame (also known as sharam) – bringing shame to a family’s reputation and honour.
- Virginity testing (also referred to as hymen, ‘2-finger’ or vaginal examination) – an inspection of the female genitalia, intended to determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal sexual intercourse. The World Health Organization and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) believe that virginity tests have no scientific merit or clinical indication. This is because there is no known examination that can prove whether a woman has had vaginal intercourse.

## Annex B – Other associated offences

The following offences, while not exhaustive, can also be associated with HBA.

- [Acid and corrosive substance attacks](#)
- [Assault](#)
- [Blackmail](#)
- [Child abuse/neglect/cruelty](#)
- [Child sexual exploitation](#)
- [Controlling or coercive behaviour](#)
- [Criminal damage to personal belongings](#)
- [False imprisonment](#)
- [False representation](#)
- [Female genital mutilation](#)
- [Human trafficking](#)
- [Hymenoplasty](#)
- [Kidnap](#)
- [Malicious communications](#)

- [Modern slavery](#)
- [Murder/homicide](#)
- [Rape and sexual offences](#)
- [Stalking and harassment](#)
- [Threats to kill](#)
- [Theft of personal documents/belongings](#)
- [Virginity testing](#)

## Tags

Forced marriage and honour based abuse    Victim care