Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London, SW1A 2AA

4th May 2021

Dear Prime Minister

Safeguard Futures Ban Child Marriage

We are writing to you as co-chairs of the Girls Not Brides National UK Partnership who are working towards ending child marriage in the UK. Our individual organisations are at the frontline of responding to women and girls experiencing child marriage and collectively we recognise this to be one of the most hidden forms of VAWG taking place within the UK.

We commend the UK government for taking a leading role in working towards ending child marriage internationally, demonstrating its commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.3. With this commitment, it is vital that the UK government ensures that no child is left behind, particularly those living within the UK. Child Marriage is often viewed as a ‘developing world issue’ and one that exclusively takes place overseas. The reality is that child marriage is an invisible but thriving issue in the UK today.

In 2019 a quarter of cases (27%, 363) dealt with by the government’s Forced Marriage Unit involved children aged under 18. Karma Nirvana, who deliver the government funded National helpline for Honour Based Abuse has responded to 1041 contacts relating to child marriage cases since 2015. Alarmingly, some of the child marriages that we as specialist organisations have managed to prevent related to girls as young as 11 years-old.

Paradoxical to the government’s commitment to ending child marriage is that it remains legal for children to marry in the UK under laws dating back to before the second world war. A marriage to a child aged sixteen or seventeen can still legally be registered and while in England and Wales parental consent is required, this is far from being a safeguard. In practice, this loophole is frequently used to coerce children into marriages. At the same time there is no legal provision currently in place to prevent religious or customary child marriages, at any age, from taking place. Existing forced marriage law does not automatically protect children from child marriage on account of their age. Unacceptably, the onus is on the child to secure their own protection under Forced Marriage law by speaking out against their own family and community which can have dangerous consequences and understandably many children are too terrified to do.

Payzee Mahmod was a British child bride aged 16 and her sister Banaz Mahmod was married aged 17. Tragically, Banaz was murdered in a so-called “honour killing” for leaving her child marriage. Payzee whose TEDx talk calling for child marriage to be banned in the UK has been viewed more than three quarter of a million times shared; “as a survivor, I know first-hand what this change in law will mean to our next generation who should not be locked in child marriages with all the harms it causes and instead be free to pursue their education and aspirations.”
We are concerned that the government’s concerted efforts to end child marriage will be met with futility if our national laws continue to undermine our global efforts. The perception of the UK government’s tolerance to child marriage has led to Bangladesh lowering its minimum marriage age using the UK as precedent in doing so. Bangladeshi officials have cited England and Wales as hypocritical for trying to engender progressive change abroad whilst turning a blind eye to child marriage at home. It is vital that the government challenges this perception by strengthening its action to end child marriage across the UK.

There is no good reason to continue allowing child marriages to take place in this day and age. We call on you to update the law in England and Wales to remove the loopholes that continue to allow child marriages of 16 and 17-year-old children to be registered and to ensure that all forms of child marriage are prevented, by making the act of marrying a child a crime.

Parliament has already recognised, by raising the minimum age for leaving education or training to 18, that childhood should be safeguarded as a time for learning and personal development. We call on you to honour your commitment to achieving 12 years of quality education. Whilst our law continues to fail to prevent child marriage, this important and significant commitment is undermined.

More than 185,000 people have signed our petition to update the law to ban child marriage demonstrating an overwhelming and united public consensus on this issue. Making child marriage a crime will ensure that all children are safeguarded against all forms of child marriage and sends out the strongest possible message that child marriage is not accepted or tolerated by your government. It will enable and mandate statutory agencies to take positive action to safeguard children, rather than relying upon the child to speak out to secure protection. It will enable every child the opportunity to complete their education, make informed choices about their future and reach their full potential. It also vitally removes the harms and barriers caused by child marriage, such as lower levels of education, domestic abuse, sexual violence, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, reduced employment opportunities, social exclusion linked to divorce and isolation. A change in the law, making it clear that all marriage under 18 is a crime, would assist all parts of the criminal justice system in protecting children.

As prime minister, we urge you to prioritise this change in law to end child marriage and secure the safe futures of girls affected by this in this country. We ask that you take this opportunity to raise the status of women and girls and demonstrate this government’s commitment to tackling violence against girls both on the international stage and to the British public. Our call for change is supported by survivors of child marriage and more than 20 national and international specialist organisations including Barnardo’s, Safelives, Human Rights Watch, Muslim Women’s Network, Galop and Youth for Change. Our call is supported by the Home Office’s Violence Against Women and Girls Advisor, Nimco Ali.

We are available at any time and welcome the opportunity to provide further briefing on our joint campaign and recommendations in this letter. We look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely

Natasha Rattu, Karma Nirvana

Lubna Maktari, Independent Yemen Group

Naana Otoo Oyortey, FORWARD

Diana Nammi, IKWRO
**Signatories in support:**

Javed Khan, CEO, Barnado’s

Suzanne Jacobs, CEO, Safelives

Galop, Catherine Bewley, Head of Sexual Violence and Young People’s Support Services,

Afran Qassim, CEO & Founder, Savera UK

Shiguafta Khan, Chief Executive Officer, The Wish Centre

Umme Imam, Executive Director, The Angelou Centre

Gudren Burnet, CEO, Standing Together

Lisa-Marie Taylor, CEO, FiLiA

Polly Harrar, Founder, The Sharan Project

Chantal Khoueiry, Founder Brides do Good

Gemma Munday, Youth For Change

Halaleh Tahir, Middle Eastern Women’s Society Organisation

Anna Juusela, CEO & Co-Founder, We Encourage

Dr Roxanne Khan, Director, Harm network

Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, Chief Executive, Surviving Economic Abuse

Firoza Mohmed, Chief Executive Officer, Humraaz

Shaista Gohir OBE, Co-Chair Muslim Womens Network UK and Nisa Global Foundation

Meena Kumari, Founder & Director, H.O.P.E Training & Consultancy

Naomi Wiseman, Barrister, Garden Court Chambers

Dr Charlotte Proudman, Barrister, Goldsmith Chambers, Fellow Queens College Cambridge

Cris McCurley, Partner, Ben Hoare Bell Solicitors and Federation of International Women Lawyers UK