

Arranged/Forced Marriage in the Orthodox Jewish Community

Guest Presenter: Fraidy Reiss, Director - Unchained At Last

April 7, 2014



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Protecting Immigrant Women and Girls Fleeing Violence

Webinar hosted by:

Heather Heiman
Forced Marriage Initiative Manager
& Senior Public Policy Attorney
Heather@tahirih.org

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Arranged/Forced Marriage in the Orthodox Jewish Community

Presented by Fraidy Reiss

Founder/Executive Director of Unchained At Last

April 7, 2014

Tahirih Justice Center Webinar

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Agenda

- ❑ A personal story of arranged/forced marriage
- ❑ The spectrum of “arranged” and “forced” marriage
- ❑ Arranged/forced marriage in the Orthodox Jewish community
- ❑ How Unchained At Last helps

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A PERSONAL STORY OF ARRANGED/FORCED MARRIAGE

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Married at 19 to a stranger



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THE SPECTRUM OF “ARRANGED” AND “FORCED” MARRIAGE

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Understanding arranged/forced marriage

- The bride and groom's families typically arrange the union – with variations on how much say the bride and groom get
- Even when the bride and groom have the option to reject a match, they often face intense pressure not to do so
- Often, too, they are young and inexperienced and are not given the time or tools they need to make an informed decision
- Sometimes they are tricked, threatened or beaten

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Is it arranged? Or is it forced?

- Arranged and forced marriage fall on the same spectrum
- At one end is a purely arranged marriage, with two fully informed adults who have unlimited times and tools to decide without pressure whether to wed
- At the other end is a marriage in which the bride and/or the groom is forced to wed without any say in the matter
- Determining when an “arranged” marriage becomes “forced” is tricky

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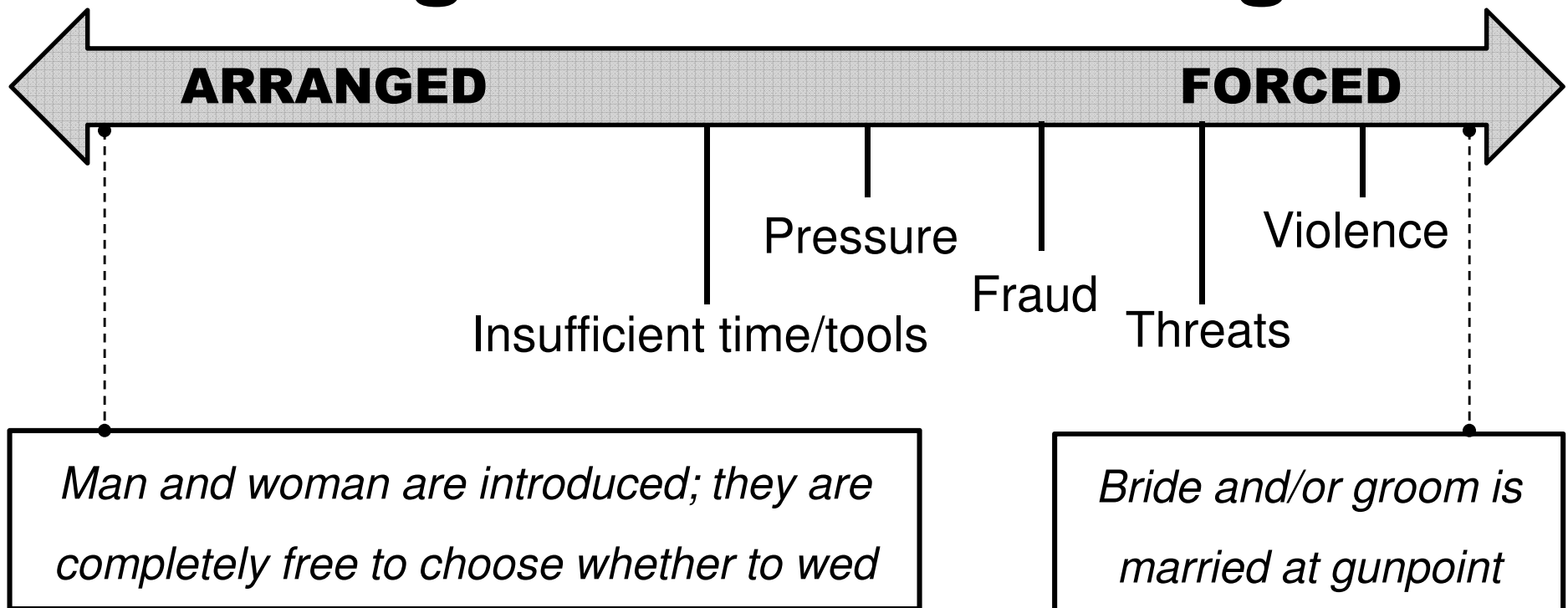
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The spectrum of arranged/forced marriage



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Lack of choice often applies to divorce too

- ❑ A woman who faces limited or no choice when she enters a marriage typically faces the same if she wants to get divorced
- ❑ Divorce often seems impossible to a woman in an arranged/forced marriage, due to religious laws, social customs, finances, her own immigration status, etc.
- ❑ Often a woman who wants to leave an arranged/forced marriage is shunned by her family and friends, who consider divorce shameful

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ARRANGED/FORCED MARRIAGE IN THE ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

- ❑ Orthodox Jews adhere to a strict interpretation of Jewish law
- ❑ Orthodox Judaism is *very* different and separate from Reform, Conservative and other Jewish denominations
- ❑ Most ultra-Orthodox Jews are Ashkenazic (of Central/Eastern European descent) and fall into two categories, with slightly different customs:
 - Hassidic
 - Litvish
- ❑ Some ultra-Orthodox Jews are Sephardic (of Middle Eastern descent)

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Marriage at a young age

Average age at which girls are expected to marry in the
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SEPHARDIC

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HASSIDIC

17

LITVISH

18

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Reasons for arranged/forced marriage in the community

- Tradition
- Aversion to sex outside marriage
- Fear of intermarriage (intensified after the Holocaust)
- Push to have many children (intensified after the Holocaust)

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Limited choice entering marriage

- Boys and girls are never allowed to meet on their own; they are kept completely separate from each other, with no contact allowed
- Marriages typically are arranged through a matchmaker
- Typically the bride and groom are young and inexperienced, never having dated or even flirted before
- The matchmaker usually approaches the boy's family and then the girl's family; if both families agree, the boy and girl "date"
- "Dating" differs in the Hassidic and Litvish communities

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Hassidic “dating”

- ❑ The bride and groom typically meet for about half an hour
- ❑ By then, the engagement party has been planned – so they face intense pressure to go along with the marriage
- ❑ If they try to resist, some families ignore or dismiss their protests
- ❑ The bride and groom are never allowed to be alone together or to have any physical contact before their wedding, not even during their engagement

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Litvish “dating”

- The boy and girl go on a limited number of “dates”
- They are not allowed to be alone together (they must remain in a public place) and they are not allowed to have any physical contact, even after they are engaged
- The average number of “dates” is seven; by then they must decide whether to marry each other, after spending only a number of hours together
- They might face intense pressure not to say no to a matchmaker

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Religious marriage contract

- The bride and groom do not sign the contract; two rabbis sign instead
- The contract is written in Aramaic, which most brides don't understand
- The contract specifies whether the bride is a virgin
- Most couples also get a civil marriage license, but some do not



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Limited choice in marriage

- Jewish law prohibits birth control (except with a rabbi's permission)
- Under Jewish law, a woman's earnings belong to her husband
- Married Orthodox Jewish women must wear a head covering; some Hassidic women must shave their hair under the head covering
- Wives are considered unclean while they menstruate and for a week thereafter, until they immerse in a ritual bath

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Limited choice leaving a marriage

- Under religious law, only a man can grant a divorce – not a woman
- Divorce is considered shameful, so women are pressured to stay
- Discussion and understanding of domestic violence are limited
- Women often have a lot of children (average 6-8 children)
- Women typically have no access to money (no bank accounts or credit cards in their name) and probably have no education
- Hassidic women often don't have a driver's license

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Religious courts create obstacles

- ❑ Orthodox Jews generally must go first to a religious court (“bet din”) for legal matters including divorces
- ❑ Bet din rules discriminate against women
 - A woman typically isn’t allowed to be a judge, lawyer or witness
 - Only a man can grant a divorce, and he can demand anything he wants in return; if he refuses to grant a divorce, she becomes a “chained woman” and cannot move on with her life
- ❑ Bet din rulings are legally binding and are upheld in civil court

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Problems in civil court too

- Often judges award custody to the parent who will continue to raise the children in the same religion
- If a woman wants to leave the religion, the entire community – even her parents and siblings – will help her husband in the divorce; they will testify against her in court and raise money for his legal fees
- If the community cannot get a court to remove her children, some rabbis resort to kidnaping the children

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Difficulties taking “basic” steps

- Women in the Orthodox Jewish community often face pressure not to:
 - Call the police, even if they are abused or threatened
 - Obtain a restraining order against a violent husband
 - Seek a domestic violence shelter
 - Go for therapy
 - Confide in a friend or relative about an unhappy marriage

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What providers should know

- People in insular communities might fear and distrust outsiders
- The rules of handshaking are different in the Orthodox community
- In the Orthodox community, people are expected to give unconditional respect to anyone who is older than they are
- Immodestly dressed women might make Orthodox Jews uncomfortable

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A question of semantics

- Orthodox Jews often do not think of their marriages as “arranged” and might be offended if asked whether their marriage was “forced”
- Instead, if you suspect a marriage was arranged/forced, ask how the spouses met, how long they knew each other before marriage, etc.

I did not realize my marriage was “arranged” until after I was divorced.

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HOW UNCHAINED AT LAST HELPS

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Unchained At Last

- ❑ Unchained is the only nonprofit in the US dedicated to helping women leave or avoid arranged/forced marriages and rebuild their lives
- ❑ Unchained provides girls and women with free legal representation, social services and emotional support to help them leave or avoid arranged/forced marriages and rebuild their lives
- ❑ Unchained also raises awareness about arranged/forced marriage in the US and pushes for relevant legislation

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About Unchained

- Unchained helps women from any culture or religion
- Unchained operates with an almost all-volunteer staff (except one part-time paid social worker)
- Two years old, Unchained already has helped or is helping more than 75 women and girls to avoid or leave arranged/forced marriages and rebuild their lives

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Unchained envisions a world where every woman is free to choose whether, when and whom to marry - and whether to leave a marriage.

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National Network to Prevent Forced Marriage

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Forced Marriage Newsletter

at Tahirih's website:

**[www.tahirih.org/advocacy/policy-areas/
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