

Preventing Forced Marriage in the United States

TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

WHAT IS FORCED MARRIAGE?

A forced marriage is one that occurs without the consent of one or both parties. Lack of consent may be caused by an individual being younger than the legal age to marry, subject to incapacity or disability, or subject to force, fraud, or coercion. In a forced marriage, family members may use emotional and psychological pressure, threaten to disown or abandon the individual, or engage in actual physical abuse in order to compel an individual to consent. Forced marriage can impact individuals of any gender, age, socio-economic status, ethnic or religious background.

FORCED MARRIAGE IS NOT ARRANGED MARRIAGE

An arranged marriage is one in which the families of one or both spouses take a leading role in arranging the marriage but the choice whether or not to accept the arrangement remains with the individual and their preferences and choices are respected.

Current child protection systems in the US are often face challenges when confronted with forced marriage cases involving minors. Without proper planning, standard responses may potentially put an individual at greater risk of harm

HOW CAN SCHOOL STAFF MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

School staff members play a critical role in recognizing when a child may be facing a crisis and can be a trusted resource that a student can turn to for help. When working with a student who may be facing a forced marriage be sure to reassure them that they have the right to choose whether, when, and whom to marry and, when working with a minor, be sure to explain the limits to confidentiality. Below are some common warning signs and red flags that may arise when an individual is facing a forced marriage situation.

WARNING SIGNS AND RED FLAGS

- Decline in grades, punctuality, or performance
- Appearing anxious, depressed, or emotionally withdrawn
- Frequent unplanned absences
- Loss of interest in going on to higher education
- Not being allowed to attend extra-curricular activities
- Close monitoring by siblings, cousins or parents
- Fear of upcoming holidays or breaks from school
- Parental request for extended leave of absence
- Uncertain if returning to school
- Siblings who have been pressured to drop out or get married early

How Would You Help?

Radhika is 17 and is originally from Bhutan. She came to the United States as a refugee with her family when she was 10 years old and now has US citizenship. Her family began exerting tremendous pressure on her to get married about a year ago, when she was 17 and a junior in high school, but Radhika refused – telling her parents that she wanted to finish high school and start college before getting married. In response, her father told her that she had no choice but to accept the groom they chose for her, and that they were actively looking for an appropriate husband. Alarmed that she might be facing a marriage before she was done with high school, Radhika mentioned her fears about getting married to her school counselor...

HOW TO DISCUSS FORCED MARRIAGE WITH YOUR STUDENT

- Talk with individuals at risk in a secure and private space
- If a student is hesitant to identify with the term “forced marriage” these questions may be useful:
 - “Do you feel you are being pressured to get married before you are ready?”
 - “Do you feel you have a choice in deciding who to marry?”
 - “Are you being pressured to marry someone who you do not want to marry?”
- Ask about and document the individual’s perception of risk. What will saying “no” to the marriage mean?
- Let the individual know they have the right to say NO to the marriage
- Reassure the individual that no religion sanctions forced marriage
- Establish a safe way to communicate and check in moving forward
- Connect with staff at the Tahirih Justice Center for expert technical assistance. We can provide confidential guidance to youth and adults facing forced marriage situations and those working to assist them.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Often teachers have conflicts around mandated reporting and students can be wary of the consequences of contacting CPS and the impact that may have on their safety at home and on their family. When working with someone at risk of forced marriage it is essential to:

- Reassure the individual of confidentiality or explain the limits of your confidentiality
- Inform the individual if you are a mandated reporter and explain to them what that means

The first meeting is vital and can make all the difference. If travel is imminent, gather as much information as possible and establish a safe way to communicate moving forward

DO NOT

- Send the individual away or return them to their family/perpetrators against their wishes
- Use family or community members as interpreters if language barriers exist
- Break confidentiality or share information without their express consent
- Approach family or community members unless the individual expressly asks you to do so
- Act as a mediator

WHAT TO DO IF A STUDENT IS FACING IMMINENT TRAVEL OVERSEAS

- Although forced marriages do happen in the U.S., individuals can be taken overseas for marriage. If you think your student may be facing a forced marriage in another country, we urge you to connect with the Tahirih Justice Center for expert technical assistance.
- Inform the student that it can be incredibly challenging to get help overseas. Reaching out to local police and agencies overseas and simple things like getting a cab or making a phone call can be very difficult.
- If travel overseas is imminent gather documentation – if possible, help them to obtain copies or pictures of their ID, driver’s license, passport, birth certificate, and other important documents.

Recommended Reading

Written in the Stars by Aisha Saeed

Shame by Jasvinder Sanghera

Secrets of the Henna Girl by Sufia Ahmed

FORCED MARRIAGE RESOURCES

Tahirih Justice Center
Forced Marriage Initiative
FMI@tahirih.org
571-282-6161
www.tahirih.org