



Preventing Forced Marriage in the United States

Stefanie, born and raised in the United States, was only 13 when her family moved to Saudi Arabia. From the moment they arrived, her father and step-mother began making arrangements for her to be married. Terrified of being raped by her potential husband, and facing increasing emotional and physical abuse at home, Stefanie secretly contacted her cousin in the US, asking for help. After being told repeatedly by local agencies and officials that nothing could be done as Stefanie was overseas, her cousin found Tahirih's Forced Marriage Initiative. Tahirih staff provided around-the-clock support, securing pro bono family law representation and working with the State Department. When Stefanie's father returned with her to the US for a visit, the pro bono attorney was able to successfully petition in court for Stefanie's removal from her father's care, and emergency custody was granted to her cousin. Stephanie now lives with loving family members and is excelling in school.*

Situations like these—involving a young woman who is scared, threatened, and desperately seeking help, and local service providers who are unsure of how or unable to assist her—have become all too familiar to the Tahirih Justice Center (Tahirih). In 2011, to respond to these challenging and highly complex cases, Tahirih launched its national Forced Marriage Initiative.

Forced marriage is a pernicious global problem threatening the freedom, safety, health and education of women and girls. UNICEF estimates that in developing countries, over 60 million women now aged 20-24 were married as girls. In the United States, forced marriage also persists. The reasons for forced marriages are

complex and varied, particularly in an American context. Parents may regard a forced marriage a way to prevent their daughter from becoming too Americanized, protect the family's honor, gain status, or achieve economic security. Whatever the rationale, the result may subject the woman or girl to severe and sustained harm, including: domestic abuse, marital rape, and other forms of violence.

Tahirih is one of the nation's foremost legal defense organizations working to protect immigrant women fleeing violence, through both direct legal services and public policy advocacy. Over the last three years, Tahirih has focused its advocacy efforts on better understanding the issue of forced marriage in the United States and on galvanizing a movement to protect women and girls with the courage to say no.

Although the United Kingdom and a few other countries have begun to recognize and address the issue of forced marriage with new laws and policies, little has been done to assist individuals facing forced marriage in the United States, leaving young women (and some men) in crisis with few resources and options.

Tahirih's **Forced Marriage Initiative** was formally launched in 2011 after years of groundwork in researching the issue and tracking and responding to cases. The initiative aims to develop a national response

Defining "Forced Marriage"

A forced marriage is one that takes place without the full and free consent of one or both parties. A lack of consent may be caused by a variety of factors, including that an individual is:

- Younger than the legal age to marry
- Subject to incapacity or disability
- Subject to force, fraud, or coercion

It is not arranged marriage, in which families may take the lead, but the ultimate choice to marry remains with the individual.

to the problem of forced marriage in immigrant communities in the United States that will enable women and girls to safely resist or escape forced marriages. Through the Forced Marriage Initiative, Tahirih aims to:

- better understand the scope and severity of forced marriage in the United States;
- raise awareness about the problem;
- encourage and empower individuals facing or fleeing forced marriages to seek help;
- build a network of service providers, advocates, and government agencies with the necessary tools and expertise to help individuals at risk;
- ultimately, reduce the incidence of forced marriage in the United States.

In Fall of 2011, Tahirih launched a **National Network to Prevent Forced Marriage**—a coalition of advocates and allies dedicated to creating a coordinated

national response to the problem of forced marriage in the United States. Tahirih is also hosting quarterly webinars which will provide advocates and allies with practical tips and guidance for handling forced marriage cases, and opportunities for continued discussion of legal and policy proposals and other efforts to improve the protections, support, and assistance available to individuals facing forced marriage in the United States.

If you know an individual who is facing a forced marriage, please feel free to contact Tahirih directly at (571) 282-6161 or FMI@tahirih.org for assistance. Tahirih staff is available to counsel individuals about their options and connect them with resources in their area, and provide technical assistance to service providers.

For more information on the National Network to Prevent Forced Marriage, resources, and updates, please visit:

www.tahirih.org/advocacy/policy-areas/forced-marriage-initiative/

National Survey on Forced Marriage

During the Summer of 2011, Tahirih conducted a **Survey on Forced Marriage in Immigrant Communities in the United States**. This survey was prepared in close consultation with research experts at the Urban Institute and community-based/advocacy organizations with relevant expertise, and distributed to thousands of recipients (including service providers, advocates, community leaders, educators, law enforcement officers, and other professionals) around the country.

Over 500 respondents from 47 states participated in the survey, providing invaluable information about challenges service providers are encountering as they try to identify and assist individuals facing forced marriage situations, barriers to victims seeking help, and the complex dynamics involved in forced marriage cases. **Key findings include:**

- **Collectively, survey respondents reported encountering as many as 3000 cases of known or suspected forced marriage over the last two years.**
- **Forced marriage is being seen in immigrant communities from 56 different countries.**
- **Two out of three respondents (67%) felt that there were cases of forced marriage not being identified in the populations with which they work.**
- Less than 10% of respondents said they had a working definition of forced marriage at their agency, and less than a quarter of respondents (22%) said their agency's screening and referral process enabled them to identify cases where forced marriage may be of concern.
- Less than one in five respondents (16%) said that their agency was properly equipped to help individuals facing forced marriage.

These survey findings suggest that we are seeing just the tip of the iceberg on this issue, and that thousands of individuals in the United States may be threatened by forced marriage every year. The stakes in these complex cases can be very high—nearly half of survey respondents who gave such details reported that victims they encountered had been subject to physical violence, and one quarter said victims had been threatened with death for resisting the marriage.