

Child Brides, Forced Marriage, and Partner Violence in America

Tip of an Iceberg Revealed

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Forced marriage is a violation of human rights and thwarts personal safety and well-being. Child brides are at higher risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) and often are unable to effectively negotiate safe sex, leaving them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including human immunodeficiency virus, and early pregnancy. The prevalence of forced marriage and child marriage in the United States is unknown. The intersection of forced marriage and child marriage and IPV is equally unknown. When 277 mothers who reported IPV to shelter or justice services were asked about a forced marriage attempt, frequency and severity of IPV, mental health status, and behavioral functioning of their child, 47 (17%) reported a forced marriage attempt with 45% of the women younger than 18 years of age at the time of the attempt. Among the 47 women, 11 (23%) reported death threats, 20 (43%) reported marriage to the person, and 28 (60%) reported a pregnancy. Women younger than 18 years reported more threats of isolation and economic deprivation associated with the attempt as well as pressure from parents to marry. Regardless of age, women experiencing a forced marriage attempt reported more intimate partner sexual abuse, somatization, and behavior problems for their children. Forced marriage attempts occurred to one in six women (17%) reporting IPV and are associated with worse functioning for mother and child. The frequent occurrence and associated effect of forced marriage attempts to maternal child functioning indicates

routine assessment for a forced marriage attempt as part of comprehensive care for women reporting IPV. (*Obstet Gynecol* 2016;127:706–13)
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Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday, which is defined as a child marriage.¹ One in three of these women married before age 15 years.¹ Child brides are often unable to effectively negotiate safe sex, leaving themselves vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including human immunodeficiency virus, and early pregnancy. Pregnancy at an early age is associated with major risk to maternal survival as well as early child morbidity and mortality.

Child brides are at greater risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) compared with peers who marry later. When the marriage is forced, it is frequently to young girls with little power in relation to their husbands and in-laws. These young brides are at high risk for domestic abuse, neglect, and abandonment. A study in the United States found child marriage to be associated with increased risk of lifetime and current psychiatric disorders compared with women married in adulthood.² Although numbers and percentages are unknown, frequently child marriage begins as a forced marriage.

A national study demonstrates the need to study forced marriage in the United States when in 2011, the Tahirih Justice Center, a legal service agency, conducted a survey in the United States of service providers working with immigrant communities (including legal and social service agencies, community-based advocates, teachers and counselors, medical and mental health professionals, police, and child protection officers) and asked agency personnel about the number of clients encountered by the agency who met a definition of forced marriage.³ Most of the service agencies served victims of family violence or sexual assault. Forced marriage was

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defined as involving a lack of full and free consent of one or both parties. Lack of consent could be because the individual was younger than the legal age to marry, subject to incapacity or disability, or subject to force, fraud, or coercion. More than 500 agency service providers, working in 47 states, responded. Collectively, survey respondents reported encountering as many as 3,000 cases of known or suspected forced marriage over the preceding 2 years, 2009–2011. Most agency respondents (67%) felt they were not identifying all the individuals in the communities they served who were threatened with or already in a forced marriage. Most agency respondents reported a lack of a working definition of forced marriage, lack of an assessment tool, and lack of training in forced marriage as major barriers to successful identification and assistance of victims. Agency respondents reported that some victims reporting forced marriage described severe physical abuse, kidnapping, and even threats of murder. Some agency providers reported that victims had attempted suicide.

THE INTERSECTION OF CHILD BRIDES, FORCED MARRIAGE, AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

Forced marriage is a violation of human rights and thwarts personal safety and well-being. How common forced marriage is in the United States is unknown as is the percentage of girls who are forced to marry. The intersection of forced marriage and violence against women by their intimate partners is equally unknown. To examine the prevalence and associated health and functioning outcomes of threats and actual forced marriage among mothers who report IPV and reach out for shelter or justice services, we interviewed 277 mothers and asked detailed questions about forced marriage.

The 277 mothers are participants in a 7-year study to measure long-term health and functioning outcomes of mothers who report IPV. Details of the 7-year study, including instruments for measuring the violence and effect of the IPV, are discussed elsewhere.⁴ In brief, 300 mothers reporting IPV were recruited from shelters (n=150) and the district attorney's office (n=150) in a U.S. city.

Mothers eligible for the study spoke English or Spanish, reported IPV (ie, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or both), qualified for shelter or a protection order, and had at least one child between the ages of 18 months and 16 years. After signed informed consent, baseline measures of frequency and severity of abuse, danger for lethality, mental health measures

of depression, anxiety, somatization, and posttraumatic stress disorder were collected. Additionally, child functioning measures on one of her children, aged 18 months to 16 years, were collected. If the mothers had more than one child, a child was chosen at random, irrespective of biological relationship to the index perpetrator.

The measures were repeated every 4 months. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish at a time and place that is safe and convenient for the mothers. Four years into the study, 92% of the participants and their children were retained. At the fourth-year interview, the participants were asked about threats or actual forced marriage over the course of their life and not specific to the index perpetrator for entry into the 7-year study.

The Forced Marriage Questionnaire, consisting of 28 questions and asked by the interviewer of each woman, was based on a 2011 national survey by the Tahiri Justice Center that defines forced marriage as lack of consent and pressures used such as physical and sexual abuse, emotional threats, and economic, immigration, and isolation pressures.³ The authors of this study predicated the 28 forced marriage questions of the 277 mothers with the following statement: "A forced marriage happens without the full and free consent of one or both parties. Lack of consent can be caused by younger than the legal age to marry or related to force, fraud, or coercion (force, fraud, or coercion includes psychological manipulation, emotional blackmail, deception, and physical threats or violence, kidnapping, and death threats). Did anyone ever try to force you to marry?" The Forced Marriage Questionnaire appears in Table 1.

We also asked age and nationality of the victim and perpetrator, persons and services the victim reached out to for assistance, if the marriage occurred, types of coercion applied, and if a pregnancy ensued.

AN ICEBERG REVEALED

At year four of the 7-year study, a sample of 277 mothers was retained from the original 300 mothers (92%) and form the participants for this study. Mothers were on average 34.63 year old (standard deviation [SD] 7.67, range 22–56 years). Children's age's ranged from 4.50 to 20.42 years old (mean 10.87 years, SD 4.20). More than half of mothers identified as Hispanic (58.1%). Mothers reported to be on average 21.13 years old when the attempts to force marriage began (SD 7.59). The average age of the perpetrator initiating the forced marriage was 27.15 (SD 8.07).



Table 1. Forced Marriage Questionnaire

Item	Question	No	Yes	NA
FM1	Did anyone ever try to force you to marry?	0	1	NA
FM2	If yes, how old were you when the force began?		AGE	NA
FM3	What country did you live in when the force began?			NA
FM4	Were you a U.S. citizen?	0	1	NA
FM5	If NO, what was your country of citizenship?			NA
FM6	How old was the man?		AGE	NA
FM7	What country did the man live in when the force began?			NA
FM8	Was the man a U.S. citizen?	0	1	NA
FM9	IF No, what was his country of citizenship?			NA
What type of force was used from the following list:				
FM10	<i>Emotional threats</i> (a parent or the man threatens self-harm, the family or man says their reputation will be ruined if you resist the marriage)	0	1	NA
FM11	<i>Isolation</i> (the family limits your social contact or ability to leave the home or go to school)	0	1	NA
FM12	<i>Social isolation</i> (threatening you with being an outcast in their community)	0	1	NA
FM13	<i>Economic threats</i> (family threatens to make you leave the house or withdraws support)	0	1	NA
FM14	<i>Threats of physical abuse</i>	0	1	NA
FM15	<i>Immigration-related threats</i> (threatening to get you deported or your parents)	0	1	NA
FM16	<i>Physical abuse such as hitting, slapping, kicking</i>	0	1	NA
FM17	<i>Sexual abuse</i>	0	1	NA
FM18	<i>Death threats</i>	0	1	NA
Who was forcing you to marry?				
FM19	<i>Parents</i>	0	1	NA
FM20	<i>Relatives</i>	0	1	NA
FM21	<i>Friends</i>	0	1	NA
FM22	<i>The man who wanted to marry you</i>	0	1	NA
FM23	Did you tell anyone about the force?	0	1	NA
If Yes to tell someone, who did you tell about the force?				
FM24	<i>Informal sources such as family and friends</i>	0	1	NA
FM25	<i>Formal sources such as a school, police, shelter, lawyer, or medical person</i>	0	1	NA
FM26	Did you receive help?	0	1	NA
FM27	Did you marry the man?	0	1	NA
FM28	Did you have a pregnancy with the man?	0	1	NA

NA, not applicable.

A summary of the statistical findings is outlined in Tables 2 and 3. To assess for differences in reported types of forced marriage characteristics by age, a series of crosstabulations with Pearson's χ^2 test were conducted. Fisher exact tests were used in instances in which observed cells had less than five. Among the 277 mothers responding to the Forced Marriage Questionnaire, 47 (17%) reported that someone had attempted to force them into marriage with 45% of the mothers younger than 18 years of age at the time of the forced marriage attempt. Among the 47 mothers, 20 mothers (43%) reported that they had married the man and 28 (60%) of the mothers reported a pregnancy with the man. The majority of the mothers did not report the forced attempt and most did not receive assistance. Forty mothers (85%) reported the forced attempt occurred in

the United States. Two mothers reported the attempt in El Salvador and the remaining five attempts occurred in Mexico. Mothers younger than 18 years at the time of forced attempt were more likely to report that the perpetrator was a non-U.S. citizen and that they experienced force from their parents to get married. These young girls reported significantly more threats of physical and social isolation and economic deprivation.

To assess for differences in key outcomes by whether a mother reported an attempted forced marriage, a series of nonparametric Mann-Whitney *U* tests were conducted. As shown in Table 3, mothers who reported an attempted forced marriage had significantly higher levels of sexual abuse and somatization compared with mothers who denied having someone attempt to force marriage on them. Children whose



Table 2. Summary of Findings

Question	Full Sample	Age (y)		P
		Younger Than 18	18 or Older	
Forced marriage attempt?				
No	230 (83.0)			
Yes	47 (17.0)			
Were you a U.S. citizen?				.270
No	12 (25.5)	7 (33.3)	5 (19.2)	
Yes	35 (74.5)	14 (66.7)	21 (80.8)	
Country of citizenship				.380
El Salvador	1 (8.3)	1 (14.3)	0 (0.0)	
Mexico	11 (91.6)	6 (85.7)	5 (100)	
Was the man a U.S. citizen?				.040
No	15 (31.9)	10 (47.6)	5 (19.2)	
Yes	32 (68.1)	11 (52.4)	21 (80.8)	
His country of citizenship				.240
Colombia	1 (6.7)	1 (10.0)	0 (0.0)	
El Salvador	2 (13.3)	2 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	
Mexico	10 (66.7)	7 (70.0)	3 (60.0)	
Pakistan	2 (13.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (40.0)	
Country where force began				.190
El Salvador	2 (2.9)	2 (9.5)	0 (0.0)	
Mexico	5 (7.7)	3 (14.3)	2 (7.7)	
United States	40 (57.1)	16 (76.2)	24 (92.3)	
Country where the man lived				.110
El Salvador	2 (4.3)	2 (9.5)	0 (0.0)	
United States	45 (95.7)	19 (90.5)	26 (100)	
Emotional threats				.870
No	2 (4.3)	1 (4.8)	1 (3.8)	
Yes	45 (95.7)	20 (95.2)	25 (96.2)	
Isolation				.010
No	21 (44.7)	5 (23.8)	16 (61.5)	
Yes	26 (55.3)	16 (76.2)	10 (38.5)	
Social isolation				.050
No	23 (48.9)	7 (33.3)	16 (61.5)	
Yes	24 (51.1)	14 (66.7)	10 (38.5)	
Economic threats				.040
No	21 (44.7)	6 (28.6)	15 (57.7)	
Yes	26 (55.3)	15 (71.4)	11 (42.3)	
Threats of physical abuse				.250
No	27 (57.4)	14 (66.7)	13 (50.0)	
Yes	20 (42.6)	7 (33.3)	13 (50.0)	
Immigration-related threats				.260
No	46 (97.9)	20 (95.2)	26 (100)	
Yes	1 (2.1)	1 (4.8)	0 (0.0)	
Physical abuse				.450
No	24 (51.1)	12 (57.1)	12 (46.2)	
Yes	23 (48.9)	9 (42.9)	14 (53.8)	
Sexual abuse				.600
No	34 (72.3)	16 (76.2)	18 (69.2)	
Yes	13 (27.7)	5 (23.8)	8 (30.8)	
Death threats				.190
No	36 (76.6)	18 (85.7)	18 (69.2)	
Yes	11 (23.4)	3 (14.3)	8 (30.8)	
Parents				.030
No	36 (76.6)	8 (38.1)	18 (69.2)	
Yes	11 (23.4)	13 (61.9)	8 (30.8)	

(continued)



Table 2. Summary of Findings (continued)

Question	Full Sample	Age (y)		P
		Younger Than 18	18 or Older	
Relatives				.140
No	38 (80.9)	15 (71.4)	23 (88.5)	
Yes	9 (19.1)	6 (28.6)	3 (11.5)	
Friends				—
No	47 (100)	21 (100)	26 (100)	
Yes	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	
The man who wanted to marry you				.000
No	25 (53.2)	16 (76.2)	9 (34.6)	
Yes	22 (46.8)	5 (23.8)	17 (65.4)	
Did you tell anyone about the force?				.770
No	28 (59.6)	13 (61.9)	15 (57.7)	
Yes	19 (40.4)	8 (38.1)	11 (42.3)	
Informal sources				.100
No	2 (10.0)	2 (22.2)	0 (0.0)	
Yes	18 (90.0)	7 (77.8)	11 (100)	
Formal sources				.070
No	17 (85.0)	6 (66.7)	11 (100)	
Yes	3 (15.0)	3 (33.3)	0 (0.0)	
Did you receive help?				.710
No	11 (55.0)	4 (50.0)	7 (58.3)	
Yes	9 (45.0)	4 (50.0)	5 (41.7)	
Did you marry the man?				.970
No	27 (57.4)	12 (57.1)	15 (57.7)	
Yes	20 (42.6)	9 (42.9)	11 (42.3)	
Pregnancy from forced marriage				.140
No	19 (40.4)	6 (28.6)	13 (50)	
Yes	28 (59.6)	15 (71.4)	13 (50)	

Data are n (%) unless otherwise specified.
 Bold indicates a significant <.05 P value.

mothers reported a forced marriage attempt had significantly higher scores on internalizing and externalizing behaviors, total problems, anxiety or depression,

somatic complaints, and aggressive behaviors compared with children whose mother denied a forced marriage attempt.

Table 3. Outcomes by Attempted Forced Marriage and No Attempts

Outcome	Attempted Forced Marriage (n=47)	No Attempted Forced Marriage (n=230)	P
Maternal			
Threats of abuse	42±14.76	41±12.81	.894
Physical abuse	37±14.29	36±13.46	.896
Sexual abuse	9.7±4.29	8.3±3.91	<.001
Danger	17±7.71	16±6.78	.273
BSI Global	30±15.68	26±17.08	.114
Anxiety	11±6.95	11±7.12	.732
Somatization	7.9±6.25	6.1±5.9	.038
Depression	11±5.53	9.3±6.74	.052
Child			
Internalizing	61.13±11.13	55.77±11.68	.005
Externalizing	59.28±11.69	55.75±12.01	.048
Total problems	61.68±10.28	56.33±11.7	.003
Anxiety depression	60.15±9.09	57.31±8.76	.009
Somatic complaints	59.3±8.07	55.95±7.49	.002
Aggressive behavior	61.32±10.85	58.52±10	.032
Attention problems	59.04±7.59	57.73±7.85	.180

BSI, Brief Symptom Inventory. Data are mean±standard deviation unless otherwise specified.
 Bold indicates a significant <.05 P value.



REPRESENTATIVENESS OF MOTHERS REPORTING FORCED MARRIAGE

One in six mothers (17%) reported a forced marriage with 45% of the women younger than 18 years of age at the time of the attempt. The mothers reported significantly more sexual abuse and somatization for themselves and more behavioral problems for their children compared with mothers not reporting a forced marriage attempt. To consider how representative the 277 mothers are to American women experiencing IPV, we reviewed the latest (ie, 2011) findings of the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey,⁵ an ongoing nationally representative random-digit-dial telephone survey of the noninstitutionalized English- and Spanish-speaking U.S. population aged 18 years or older. In 2011, a total of 14,155 adult interviews were conducted, 7,758 of which were women, with a weighted response rate of 33.1%. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey report suggests not only high lifetime prevalence of IPV among American women, 31.5%, but also a range of effects as a result of the IPV, including 13.4% of women report physical injury and 9.1% of women missed at least 1 day of work or school because of experiencing IPV. In addition to these near-term effects, women who report IPV also report greater risk for a range of long-term health consequences including mental health problems of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety.

The 277 mothers experiencing IPV in our study reached out for assistance. How common is help-seeking by American women experiencing IPV? The 2011 national survey on IPV⁵ notes that during their lifetimes, 6.9% of women reporting IPV needed medical services, 8.8% of the women needed legal services, and 3.6% of women needed housing services (eg, shelters). Analyses of the 2010 national survey on IPV⁶ reveals that nearly half of female victims who indicated a need for services did not receive any of the services needed as a result of IPV experienced during their lifetimes, implying that more than half of the victims of IPV needing services did reach out for assistance. Additionally, the 2011 national survey⁵ suggests many victims of sexual violence, stalking, and IPV were first victimized at a young age. Among female victims of completed rape, an estimated 78.7% were first raped before age 25 years (40.4% before age 18 years). Similar to the mothers in our study reporting an attempt at forced marriage and significantly more sexual abuse, compared with mothers not reporting an attempt forced marriage, results from the recent 2011 national survey suggest that sexual

violence by an intimate partner is frequently experienced at an early age because a majority of victims experienced their first victimization before age 25 years with a substantial proportion experiencing victimization in childhood or adolescence.⁵ Forty percent of mothers in our study reporting a forced attempt marriage reported the attempt as a child, before the age of 18 years, and 60% reported a pregnancy with the perpetrator of the forced marriage. It is reasonable to forecast that a child marriage increases the risk of statutory rape and, therefore, higher lifetime sexual abuse such as the significantly higher reports of sexual abuse among the women reporting attempted forced marriage.

Many of the randomly chosen women responding to the 2011 national survey describe early sexual victimization, especially during childhood and adolescence, and thereby resemble the mothers in our study who also report early sexual victimization with an attempt at forced marriage. We question whether women responding to the recent national survey were also victims of attempted child or forced marriage and associated sexual victimization. Clearly, we learn the answers only to the questions we ask. Additionally, more than half of the women in the 2010 national survey reached out for assistance.⁶ Sometimes the reach out occurs to health care providers. Practitioners of women's health encounter women daily experiencing IPV or have IPV in their past, which may be accounting for medical problems, especially mental health problems and somatization, in the present. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force lists a B recommendation that supports all health care practitioners screen all women between the ages of 14 and 46 years for IPV and provide or refer to services that offer support to abused women.⁷ To add assessing for a forced marriage attempt after a positive response to IPV screening can offer more insight into the woman's cumulative violence and enable comprehensive planning to better mitigate present and future problems for her and her children.

Unquestionably, IPV is an important public health problem that affects the lives of millions of persons in the United States. These forms of violence can lead to serious short- and long-term consequences including physical injury, poor mental health, chronic physical health problems, and death.^{5,6} When the physical or sexual abuse occurs to a minor, the lifelong effect can be greater with long-term consequences.

Adults, who survive childhood abuse and neglect, are more likely to repeat the cycle of violence as a result of a higher likelihood of social isolation, family dysfunction, and mental health disease related



to cumulative trauma.⁸ Research shows a significant correlation among early childhood neglect, physical and emotional abuse, and poor health outcomes in adulthood.⁸ Dyad outcomes from a 7-year study demonstrate a direct effect of maternal dysfunction on child dysfunction. Mothers who reported clinical and borderline clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety were seven times more likely to have children with the same problems, and mothers with borderline clinical and clinical symptoms of aggression and hostility were 4.5 times more likely to have children with the same external problems.⁹ Modeling of the dyadic relationship over time supports a sustained negative intergenerational effect of violence against women on behavioral disorders of their children.¹⁰ In this analysis, attempted or actual forced marriage was associated with significantly more behavioral dysfunctions of the children.

LEGAL INTERVENTIONS

Numerous international legal instruments specifically address and prohibit child marriage. For example, Article 1¹ of the 1964 UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages states: “[n]o marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person after due publicity and in the presence of the authority competent to solemnize the marriage and of witnesses, as prescribed by law.”¹¹ Regarding marriage between adults, Article 23³ of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states: “no marriage shall be entered into without the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”¹¹ However, these international and national statements do not necessarily translate into country-specific laws.

Presently, few state laws exist in the United States specifically against forced marriage, and state laws setting supposed minimum ages of consent to marry have a number of exceptions that can operate to lower that age. There is also very little recognition of forced marriage in federal or state agency programs, including those serving vulnerable populations. As one example, the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program within the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services recently invited grant applications from community-based programs working to prevent forced marriage, but it was only as of the 2014 grant cycle that such efforts were expressly made an allowable activity under the grant.¹² Early detection and intervention can interrupt the violence and endangerment of early and forced marriage and potentially secure victim safety and

mitigate toxic stress on the individual and familial system. Advocates³ are seeking a national action plan to set a federal strategy to tackle child and forced marriage and pursuing multipronged campaigns for change at the federal and state levels that include increasing the understanding of forced marriage as a form of IPV; building up the capacity of existing antiviolence programs to assist victims; dedicating funding for new forced marriage-specific resources and programs (ie, a national hotline and information or referrals clearinghouse); ensuring access to civil protection orders for forced marriage victims; strengthening state laws (and limiting exceptions) on the age of consent to marry; implementing safeguards against forced marriages and protection for forced marriage victims in immigration laws for marriage-based visas; and ensuring that criminal justice options are available to forced marriage victims.

Our findings have limitations that may underrepresent forced marriage among abused women who access justice services or seek safe shelter. We only sampled from shelters designated for abused women; therefore, abused women who access a shelter for homeless persons were missed. Similarly, abused women who seek orders of protection from a private lawyer or legal service other than the county District Attorney’s office were missed. Our participants were limited to English- and Spanish-speakers. Participants may have underreported or minimized forced marriage, victimization, or functioning status. The researchers acknowledge recall bias was operant in all responses.

Child marriage and forced marriage are perhaps the most urgent human rights and development challenges of our time. Forced marriage harms girls and women, their families, communities, economies, and nations the world over. As we learned from the 277 mothers in our study, many women reporting partner violence also report a forced marriage, frequently before adulthood. Many of these threatened and actual forced marriages were to minors, younger than 18 years of age. In this study, 45% of those reporting forced marriage were a child at the time of the force and threats of harm, including murder. These data present a clear message for child protective services to include threats or actual forced marriage as a form of child abuse and child endangerment with those staffing helplines trained and at the ready to respond to frontline service providers reporting forced marriages, because these cases can present urgent protection needs and pose unique challenges, particularly if there is a risk that the child may be sent abroad.

Integrated systems of care delivery for child and adult victims of forced marriage are urgently needed



as is the awareness among health care providers of women experiencing intimate partner abuse that their likelihood of having experienced a forced marriage attempt exists. With one in three American women reporting IPV and one in six women in this study reporting a forced marriage attempt, it is recommended that health care providers to victims of IPV include routine assessment for a forced marriage attempt as part of comprehensive care.

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