

# Identifying and Responding to Forced Marriage: TIPS FOR REFUGEE SERVICE PROVIDERS

## WHAT IS FORCED MARRIAGE?

A forced marriage is a marriage to which one or both parties do not, or cannot, consent and in which one or more elements of force, fraud, or coercion are present. Forced marriage can impact individuals of any age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, national origin, and ethnic or religious background. Forced marriage is different from arranged marriage, in which families may take the lead, but the ultimate choice of whether, when, and whom to marry remains with the individual and they are able to express preferences without facing consequences. However, clients may use the term “arranged marriage” even when there is not consent for the marriage.

## HOW CAN FORCED MARRIAGE PRESENT IN YOUR CASELOAD?



## HOW DO I SPOT A FORCED MARRIAGE?

Forced marriage intersects with other forms of harm including child abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and female genital mutilation/cutting. Being aware of forced marriage as a common form of underlying abuse can help you better address client needs when they present concerns that may at first seem unrelated. Often, clients do not directly disclose that they are facing a forced marriage, or may share information about a marriage, but not indicate that it is/was forced.

### Some warning signs of forced marriage are:

- Siblings’ or other family history of forced or early marriages
- Mental health concerns including: depression, anxiety, isolation, emotional withdrawal, self-harm, or suicide attempts – **Note: Often times we can make assumptions about the origins of mental health concerns within refugee populations and fail to ask about current or past domestic violence and abuse, instead focusing on experiences of violent conflict and displacement. It is important to ask the right questions!**
- Family disputes where violence or threats are used to resolve conflicts.
- Unreasonable restrictions by parents such as “house arrest,” not being allowed to speak to service providers alone, or being monitored at school or work – **Note: Creating opportunities to speak 1:1 with individuals is key to opening space for disclosure and support.**
- Unusual or unexpected travel overseas.
- Out-of-the-ordinary or unfamiliar visitors or houseguests
- Health concerns such as FGM/C, virginity tests, and increased attention to gynecological health or fertility; early, unwanted, or concealed pregnancy.
- Decline in behavior, performance, or attendance at work or school.
- Fear of upcoming holidays, expressing uncertainty about whether they will continue at school or work as winter break, spring break, and summer tend to be when weddings occur and individuals can be cut off from support at school or work.
- Sudden withdrawal from school or work, especially if pressured by family with no valid reason given to resettlement staff.
- Individual or siblings reported missing, or frequent running away.

## CREATE A SAFE SPACE TO TALK ABOUT FORCED MARRIAGE:

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- Consider creating an excuse to speak to the individual privately—for example, say that the individual must have an assessment to place them into the right classes at school.
- Talk to individuals in a private space that is completely away from family or other close community members.
- Respect the individual's wishes to talk/not talk to someone from their particular community.
- Ensure that the individual feels safe with the interpreter. Whenever possible, use anonymous telephonic interpretation and NEVER use a family member or community member to interpret.
- **ASK:** How did you meet your partner/future spouse? How does marriage typically happen in your family/community? How do you feel about that for yourself? Do you feel like your preferences about whom and when you marry are being respected?
- **Share information about confidentiality or limits to confidentiality as soon as possible.** If the person is under 18, be aware that current child protection systems in the U.S. face challenges when confronted with forced marriage cases and standard response protocols can put individuals at greater risk of harm. **If you are a mandated reporter, when working with minors it is essential to:**

- » Inform the individual as early as possible in the conversation. Explain what mandated reporting is clearly and ensure that they understand, especially the fact that someone could speak to their parents if they share certain details or information. This allows them to make an informed decision about their safety and the type of response that would be helpful for them.
- » Contact the Forced Marriage Initiative at Tahirih for advice before reporting.
- » If a report must be made, whenever possible work with an advocate at the Tahirih Justice Center's Forced Marriage Initiative to ensure the call is handled in a way that is most strategic and beneficial to your client.
- » Before reporting, work to ensure that your client has an opportunity to safety plan with an advocate at Tahirih's Forced Marriage Initiative.

## A CLIENT DISCLOSES A FORCED MARRIAGE. WHAT DO I DO?

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- **Call the Forced Marriage Initiative at the Tahirih Justice Center for technical assistance—571-282-6187**
- **Maintain a non-judgmental attitude and take a survivor-centered approach. Remember:**

- » The line between arranged marriage and forced marriage can seem blurry to the person, to their family, and to you.
- » Perceiving judgement about one's community, family, and culture can cause the person to feel misunderstood and reluctant to confide in you or other advocates. It is normal for individuals to disagree with their family's actions and attitudes but still love and care for them.
- » The individual may be making a traumatic decision that could result in the loss of their family and community, and may leave them feeling isolated and with little support. Validate this and be patient with uncertainty and backtracking.

**For Forced Marriage Referrals or Technical Assistance:**  
571-282-6187 or [FMI@tahirih.org](mailto:FMI@tahirih.org)



- Assess urgency—when is the marriage? Is there imminent travel overseas or within the U.S.?
- In the case of imminent travel overseas, use Tahirih’s *Safety Planning for Travel Overseas* tip sheet found at [preventforcedmarriage.org](http://preventforcedmarriage.org)
- Ask about and document the client’s perception of risk. What will saying “no” to the marriage mean? What has happened when they or their siblings have said “no” or gone against decisions in the past?
- Set up a safe way for them to communicate in the future, such as a new, confidential email or a private phone.
- **ASK:** What are your wishes in regards to the marriage? What do you want for your future?
- **Educate about rights and laws:**

- » They have the right to say no to a marriage or a partner they do not want.
- » They have the right to leave a marriage they do not want to stay in.
- » No religion sanctions forced marriage.
- » Sex is never an obligation. Rape and sexual assault can occur within a marriage and marriage does not remove the requirement for consent.

## NEVER:

- Share information with anyone else without consent.
- Send the individual away or return them to their family/perpetrators against their wishes.
- **Act as a mediator. Do not speak to family or community members about the marriage unless the individual expressly asks you to do so. Even things that seem helpful, such as sharing information about U.S. laws with parents as a way of warning them, can reveal that an individual has asked for help, and this can have serious consequences.**



## TAHIRIH CAN HELP! WE CAN:

- Provide advice to case managers at any stage, even just to discuss warning signs and how to have safe conversations.
- Serve forced marriage clients nationally, and provide long term support.
- Continue to work with U.S. based clients who travel overseas.
- Provide expert legal services to address common immigration and family law matters faced by forced marriage survivors.

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