POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS FORCED MARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

**Forced marriage is a serious problem in the United States.**

Thousands of individuals — girls and women, as well as boys and men, from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds — may face forced marriages every year, denied the right to decide whether, when, and whom to marry. In one of the first attempts to quantify the extent of forced marriage in the United States, a 2011 national survey by Tahirih Justice Center identified as many as 3,000 forced marriage cases in a period of just two years.

Forced marriage victims often fall between the cracks in the United States, with dire consequences. Victims can suffer severe and lifelong harm, including physical and mental health issues, barriers to education, and domestic and sexual abuse.

Current laws and resources are inadequate to address the unique challenges associated with forced marriage. Tahirih Justice Center urges action on the following policy recommendations to protect and support those facing or fleeing forced marriages, and to end this human rights abuse in the United States.

**OUR RESPONSE**

THE U.S. MUST DEVELOP AND ADOPT A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN IN COLLABORATION WITH ADVOCATES, SURVIVORS, AND IMPACTED COMMUNITIES — TO CONNECT FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES, OUTLINE GAPS AND NEEDS, AND DRIVE AND MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARD SPECIFIC GOALS, INCLUDING:

**Our Core Priorities**

- Increase understanding of forced marriage as a form of family violence and abuse, and build the capacity of existing programs to assist victims.
- Dedicate funding for new forced marriage-specific resources and programs.
- Ensure access to civil protection orders for forced marriage victims.
- Strengthen state laws on the age of consent to marry.
- Implement safeguards in federal immigration laws for marriage-based visas.
- Ensure that criminal justice options are available to forced marriage victims.

- Increase understanding of forced marriage as a form of family violence and abuse, and build the capacity of existing programs to assist victims — An individual facing a forced marriage may have only one chance to reach out for help — and if she does not find it, she may have lost her only lifeline. Yet many frontline responders and advocates have little familiarity with forced marriage or understanding about how best to respond. Tahirih’s 2011 national survey found that few agencies had a working definition of forced marriage. Overall, only 16% of respondents felt their agencies were equipped to help, with many of those giving victims “circular referrals” to other agencies. Training is urgently needed to make sure legal and social services agencies, domestic violence and sexual assault advocates, police and child protection officials, and other professionals can swiftly recognize and skillfully respond to forced marriage situations. For example, the National Domestic Violence Hotline and other national hotlines serving victims of violence and exploitation should receive training and funding to build their capacity to handle calls from forced marriage victims. Foundation and government grantmakers should clarify that forced marriage falls within the scope of grants for domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and other forms of violence and abuse.

- Dedicate funding for new forced marriage-specific resources and programs — An NGO-run hotline/textline and clearinghouse for information and referrals should be created for forced marriage victims and their advocates. A national technical assistance provider should be designated to give expert guidance to advocates handling cases.
Our approach

Tahirih launched the Forced Marriage Initiative in 2011 in response to the alarming results of our forced marriage survey and the acute need to mobilize a concerted, national response. We formed the National Network to End Forced Marriage, which includes thousands of advocates and allies from across the United States, and the National Forced Marriage Working Group, which is a core group of survivor advocates, subject matter experts, and other dedicated professionals. Our policy priorities were developed in extensive consultation with members of both groups, and reflect our commitment to a comprehensive policy platform rather than a single, narrow approach.

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