



SHELTER AND HOUSING FOR SURVIVORS OF FORCED MARRIAGE

Exploratory Research Into the Experiences and
Needs of Survivors/ Those At-Risk of Forced
Marriage and Service Providers in the Greater
Toronto Area *[excerpts from the original report]*

AUGUST 2017



The I Do!

Project

The I Do! Project is based out of the Greater Toronto Area and Waterloo Region, Ontario. We aim to raise awareness about Forced Marriage in Canada through education, training, research and support. Through our education and training initiatives, we are able to provide valuable knowledge and support to service providers and informal supports regarding Forced Marriage. We work through a preventative lens with groups and individuals, who are at-risk to identify warning signs of Forced Marriage and provide a platform for survivors to share their stories, needs and provide feedback to strengthen our collective ability to respond to these situations. We also engage in research, such as this project, to better capture and understand the shared and unique experiences of survivors and those at-risk face and to work towards creating a stronger system of support in our communities around Forced Marriage.

The

Research

In December 2015, the I Do! Project received funding from the Laidlaw Foundation to conduct research exploring the experiences and needs of survivors of forced marriage and those at-risk. Over the next year the research team conducted interviews and focus groups with 40 participants gathering information about their experience accessing services and support and exploring ways to improve our communal systems of support for this particularly vulnerable population of people. The following report focuses on the themes of awareness building, prevention and training as it pertains to forced marriage. A comprehensive report is available on our website, idoproject.ca.



Research

Methodology

To complete this research a team of experienced community-based researchers was assembled. In addition, two advisory committees, a survivor's committee and a service provider committee, were developed to help inform the research and ongoing mentorship was provided by Dr. Ginette Lafrenière from the Wilfrid Laurier Faculty of Social Work. Dr. Lafrenière helped guide ethical research practice and worked with the research team to ensure their practices, procedures and methodology was of the utmost quality. This research was put through ethics review, through the Community Research Ethics Office in Waterloo, Ontario. Ethics approval was granted in August 2016. In addition, research team members completed TCPS2 training and received their certification in research ethics.

Participants were recruited using primarily a snowball sampling methodology and through referrals from our Survivor's Group and social service providers. Participants were primarily located in the GTA (several were located in Waterloo Region), or were currently living elsewhere but had accessed services in the GTA. A total of 40 participants contributed to this research:



- Individual interviews with survivors (21 participants);
- Individual interviews with service providers (2 participants).



- Focus group with at-risk youth (8 participants);
- Two focus groups for service providers (9 participants).

Due to the sensitivity and vulnerability of the research participants, further demographics were not collected through this research.

Housing and Shelter

Housing/shelter was the most common concern among participants. For some it was a barrier to leaving their forced marriage and for others, who left, it became their largest hurdle to overcome. In most cases, participants were fleeing their forced marriage and left everything, including their money and IDs behind. To further complicate things they often found themselves fleeing to a new city or even country. With

little money they often utilized women's, youth, and family shelters during their search for more permanent housing. Some participants were successful obtaining transitional housing or getting subsidized housing whereas others found themselves in apartments they could not afford or sharing overcrowded and unsafe accommodations.

“ I think my experience has been positive in terms of the route that I was able to take.

Shelters have, most shelters, have **inbuilt support for women** who do come in, even if it was short term. There would be counselling, they would be able to fast track your legal aid certificate, they already have lawyers on hand, so those kind of things happen quickly. For me it was a faster process and I was able to access services.” - Participant

EMERGENCY/ SHORT-TERM SHELTERS

Most participants talked about utilizing shelters while working to rebuild their lives. Shelters acted as a landing place for survivors coming from other cities or countries to escape their forced marriage. They also acted as a centralized place to receive supports, particularly noted were the built-in supports in shelters that are not usually found in general housing and supports around navigating the system.

Participants felt that shelters opened up access to supports in an easier and organized way. They felt that shelters could more easily direct them

to the supports they needed, were able to speed along processes like getting ID and legal support, and in some cases provide advocacy to remove barriers to accessing certain services.

Participants also found informal support in the shelters through sharing and learning from peers who had experienced similar things as themselves. These relationships were important to many of the participants and their shared experience made an authentic connection and that was felt to be very important to their wellbeing:

“There was another girl at the shelter who was **going through the same thing** as I was and she was also helpful... Getting to know the same people that went through the same thing helps a lot.”- Participant

“Not only was I able to find a place of safety, which allowed me to kind of gather my thoughts, plan for the future, but I was also **able to find resources** that I didn't have to go out and hunt. Um, so that, because that hunting, or being able, having to go out is also not always possible. If you're worried for your safety, you're not going to be able to go out all that often.”- Participant

“I think my real informal supports came in once I had reached the shelter and I had found I made friends. **I was able to speak with counsellors, but more often it would be my roommates.**”- Participant



“I think it was like, three or four months only and they **allowed me to stay there longer** because I had no means of staying anywhere yet. I didn't have a job. I didn't have any IDs. Just because it was taking a while for all of them to be processed, so they let me stay there at least six or seven months longer than they allowed anyone else to stay.”

- Participant

“There's a huge line up for all of these processes and a lot of times it's slow. So I have a case that we had, I believe we waited for four months for a name change. So **it's a very long process and our shelters are short-term stay**. Because of the long processes to access all of these services and the long wait-list we have, I don't think we have served a woman who has experienced a forced marriage for anything less than five months. Our stays are usually 6-8 weeks.”

- Participant

“Living in the shelters, I think that would be my main uh, challenge because I couldn't find housing that was affordable in the City and um getting subsidized housing was very difficult. I was at my first shelter for a few months. But because of the type of shelter it is, for emergency, **I couldn't stay there for so long**, so I was kind of forced to go to another shelter to stay there a bit longer. I was always worried that maybe within a year I won't find permanent housing.”

- Participant



With shelter being a temporary solution to their housing needs, participants often felt significant pressure and stress around finding and maintaining housing. With it often taking survivors between four months to a year to find housing in the community, because of the complexity of their situations, many felt that more time and accommodations were needed in the shelter system and/or more transitional housing was needed.

Service providers mirrored this and talked about extended stays and the wait time for processing things like IDs, name changes etc. and that shelters were often working to accommodate these realities by providing un-mandated longer stays.

For those who were not able to have an extended stay at a shelter, they talked about shelter hoping in order to survive, meaning that they went from shelter to shelter until they were able to secure housing. Survivors who felt that the shelter they were staying at did not understand the nuances of forced marriage or could not effectively help with their needs also used this technique.

Some participants felt that having to move from shelter to shelter was an extremely stressful experience. Because of the trauma from their forced marriage, the feeling of safety became that much more important and with every shelter move they made they had to start the process of learning to trust and feel secure all over again.

HOUSING

The transition from shelter or temporary housing into a more permanent housing situation was complicated for most participants. For many of the participants this would be the first time they had the autonomy and responsibility to provide their own housing or shelter.

Inexperience was a major barrier around securing housing. When participants were first searching for a place to rent, they felt that they had a very limited understanding of the rental market and its processes, thus making them increasingly vulnerable to exploitive housing situations, like substandard conditions or inflated rent prices.

This inexperience also meant that participants were largely unaware of their rights, particularly when it came to be judged and denied housing due to unfair practices such as, “not renting to someone on OW”, racial profiling, and requiring the person to first have Status before they will be rented to, etc. Experiences like these were very common among participants.

There were other consistent barriers to obtaining housing experienced by participants that reflected unresponsive policies, such as: In order to apply for subsidized/priority housing one participant needed to obtain a parental signature, which was not possible because she was escaping her family who was forcing a marriage on her; several other participants talked about the barrier of where the abuse happened. For some, when applying for priority housing or looking to receive other supports, they found they were not eligible because their abusive EX and/or the abuse itself happened abroad.

Other barriers talked about were linked to limited income or lack of employment, the difficulty finding affordable housing in the GTA, language barriers, issues with IDs and name changes and lack of responsive or available transition housing.

“I felt like I’m here, it’s home. Yeah. But it took very long. **Took 10 months almost**, for me to get the housing.”

- Participant

“I feel like that’s where it started, we settled in a apartment but no furniture with high rent. My rent was \$1250. Um I didn’t have any income, any job, anything. I was expected to pay rent after next month. Mentally I was very depressed because **I was financially struggling.**”

- Participant

“I would change the housing system, because they said **I wasn’t allowed to be housed** because my husband lived abroad, which was very unfair. Yeah I would change that, because I came out of a very very terrible alcoholic and abusive relationship. I would give priority to everybody that’s abused, not somebody who lives here or doesn’t live here.”

- Participant

LIFE AFTER HOUSING

Many of the survivors participating in this research talked about their needs post-shelter. Participants talked about the need for ongoing and longer-term support once they secured housing. They found that support diminished significantly after leaving the shelter, whereas they still needed support to keep their housing, obtain employment and re-establish their lives.



“So in terms of formal support I do feel like I was supported to the maximum extent possible at the shelter. After leaving the shelter, it was harder to access support like counselling and therapy services. It is extremely expensive in the city and they have wait times... I, my personal choice was feminist counselling was not available like very easily, so those were some of the **barriers I experienced in accessing support services** after I left the shelter and that is something that is very ongoing.” - Participant

“... I never had those kind of expectations on me, to go and provide housing for myself. So I wouldn't even really know where to begin. The thought never occurred to me that I would be living on my own as a young woman, because that is **not what women do where I come from.**” - Participant

“Me and like my close friend our parents, or our moms to be specific, had a forced marriage so we know that, even though it’s been a lot of years afterward, **it still affects the kids and it affects the mom**, like the woman in the marriage if the woman is forced to do it. And it’s really funny because most people, you think of forced marriage as just happening in the moment, but even after 20 years or 40 years it could still really affect people.” - Participant

Call to Action



The recommendations highlighted in our [Call to Action](#) are etched in the need for increased awareness and capacity in supporting survivors of forced marriage. Through this research it has become clear that forced marriage is a unique issue that is becoming more recognized and that the issue requires attention and considerable focus because it does not fully fit typical models of support that exist in the violence sector. With this, is a call for more education, awareness and training.

What Can I Do?

- 1 Become Informed:** Visit our website www.idoproject.ca, read our full research report, read about the issue and gather knowledge.
- 2 Be a Voice:** Share what you know, bring the topic of forced marriage up regularly in applicable and strategic situations. Spread the Word!
- 3 Advocate:** Be an advocate for survivors by helping to address and remove barriers to receiving the services they need and be aware and able to assist them in navigating the system of support around housing.
- 4 Do a Policy Review:** Look at how policies at your agency or organization may or may not work for those experiencing forced marriage and work towards solutions.
- 5 Educate:** Help others to understand the issue of Forced Marriage. Bring up the topic in your workplaces, among peers, and with people of authority and through challenging them to become better educated, they will develop better policies and provide better support as a result.
- 6 Support:** Publicly support initiatives to improve or expand housing and shelter services for survivors.

What Can WE Do?

- 1 Enhance Support:** Work to advocate and address barriers to receiving priority status on housing, as well as other essential services. In addition, look to enhance processes for survivors through language support, ESL and a way to identify that an agency is knowledgeable and equipped to support survivors of forced marriage.
- 2 Develop a Continuum of Care:** Collaborate and work towards identifying or creating a continuum of care for survivors that reflects their needs at various stages as they re-establish their lives.
- 3 Housing Development:** Continue to advocate and work towards affordable housing solutions, with a focus on transitional and long term subsidized and supported housing.
- 4 Document:** Identify the common areas that shelters and support services work outside of or beyond their set mandate to give support to survivors, in order to better understand gaps in support and where to work to formalize processes and obtain more resources.

What is a Forced Marriage?

A forced marriage is any marriage that does not have the **full and free consent** of **both** partners to the marriage.¹

Some forced marriages include violence, forcible confinement or threats of violence, but many do not. It is still a forced marriage if it involves emotional blackmail, harassment, deceit, or the threat of being shunned or disowned by the person's family or community.

How Will I Know If It's a Forced Marriage?

Is there **violence** involved?

Are there **threats of violence**?

Is the person **forcibly confined** to their room or home and denied access to their friends and outside help?

Is **emotional blackmail** used to pressure the person to marry? Emotional blackmail may include threats such as: If you don't marry this person, your younger sister will have to marry him; if you don't marry this person, your father will have a heart attack and it will be your fault if he dies; if you don't marry this person, I will divorce your mother.

Is the person being **harassed**? Ongoing harassment constitutes **emotional duress**. This can include being repeatedly told that you are a bad person for not accepting a marriage that your family or community has chosen for you. Or it may involve constant, unrelenting pressure to marry.

Is **deceit** involved? Has the person been taken on a "vacation" only to find that they are expected to marry someone against their will?

Is the person threatened with being **disowned and shunned** by their family or community if they do not accept the marriage?

Is the person told that they **must get married now** even if it means that they cannot finish school or start a career, when that is what they want to do?

Is the person told that they **cannot remain single**, when that is what they want?

Is the person told that they **cannot choose their own partner**?

Is the person **too young** to give valid consent to a marriage?

If you answered **YES** to any of the questions above, then there is a good chance that the marriage is a forced marriage.

Is Forced Marriage Legal?

Forced marriage is against the law in Canada. A forced marriage is not a valid marriage under Canadian law and can be annulled.

How Can I Get Help for Someone?

If there is immediate danger, call **911**

You can also call the **Assaulted Women's Helpline**. They are open 24/7 & provide help in over 100 languages:

1.866.863.0511

(416) 863.0511 (Greater Toronto Area)

1.866.863.7868 (TTY)

#SAFE (#7233) (cell)

www.awhl.org

How Do I Help Someone Who Has Been Taken Abroad to Another Country?

If someone has been taken abroad call Global Affairs:

1.800.387.3124 (inside Canada or U.S.) or

613.996.8885 collect (outside Canada).

If you are calling for someone else, give them as much information as possible.

If the individual at risk is calling, make sure they give Global Affairs all the details of their situation and let them know if it is safe to return their call.

¹ UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16.2, 1948

Would you know how to help someone at risk of forced marriage, already in a forced marriage, or facing related abuse?



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