



ENHANCING CAPACITY THROUGH TRAINING & AWARENESS

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.

Training and Awareness:

The Current Context

Survivors and service providers both shared that there was an increased need for awareness building, education and training around Forced Marriage. When it came to raising awareness there was a focus on prevention and intervention, in terms of providing presentations to educate the general public and those at-risk, as well as educating service providers.

Overall, it was clear that almost every participant had experienced a situation where the lack of awareness and understanding about the issue of forced marriage among service professionals and informal supports resulted in a negative experience:

Dismissal—Among some of the issues were a belief that forced marriage does not happen, and more specifically does not happen in Canada. This disbelief fueled a theme of survivor's needing to provide the onus of proof of forced marriage as a social issue but also an issue they experienced. While the onus of proof being on the victim of violence has been a long standing issue within the spectrum of gendered violence it seemed magnified by participants due a more intensified lack of awareness on the issue.

Defining the Experience—A somewhat surprising outcome of this research was that not only did service providers struggle with identifying and defining a

“They were **dismissive**. They didn't think this sort of thing happens today. They think I'm making it up. They wouldn't do anything. They said I have to provide proof or they are not going to do anything.” - Participant

“They shouldn't just **dismiss** something because it's weird to them and they don't believe it. I actually put myself in a lot of danger when I went to the police.” - Participant

situation as a forced marriage but so did survivors. For many they had not heard of forced marriage or had identified their own experience as such. This ambiguity was mirrored with service providers and those at-risk. This symbolizes the need for awareness and training to be focused across multiple stakeholders, including those at-risk.

Racism—The lack of awareness and understanding of forced marriage led to experiences of racism, such as being transferred to another worker (of the same culture as the participant) with the focus on ensuring the participants cultural community did not accuse the intervening agency staff of racism, which was deemed more important than who best

could support the participant's needs. There was an ongoing struggle in this research between balancing 'cultural norms or practices' with human rights and often the default went to forced marriage being a cultural norm or practice and therefore it was felt by some service providers that it was not their place to intervene, as it was thought of as imposing their own western values. Participants also talked about race-fueled micro-aggressions such as, "go back to your home country" being common experiences. These statements were particularly hurtful as some participants had risked their life to escape their country to get out of/or avoid a forced marriage. Unfortunately in these situations the care and safety of participants was compromised.

“They **don't think** this can happen in Canada. It upsets their view of things. They think it's so easy to get out of these things in Canada. They just don't know. They didn't know how to help and they didn't try to get anyone who could help. Maybe there was no one. I don't know. But there should be someone. I'm not the only person this happens to.” - Participant

“My personal level of awareness ...I had **no awareness** of what forced marriage was, because it'd never really been described or experienced in kind of a mainstream way. I was told by the agency after I shared what had happened to me. I didn't believe it was forced marriage because I didn't know and one of the first statements that was made to me was that it was a breach of my human rights.” - Participant

What do I do now? For those that were able to identify a forced marriage situation (among all participants) often there was confusion as to where to go next and how to access support needed, approaches to take, etc. This calls for training to both focus on identifying forced marriage but also how to best support survivors and those at-risk and work towards making change.



“Uh, you know, they’re pretty good but sometimes they just need a little **bit more training.**”

- Participant

“I think I went through about three different counsellors before I found the right one... she actually went out and did her **own research**, and she read about it online to understand and how to provide me the counsel that would help me through my journey. But it took three counsellors. It was the third one, you know what I mean, so we’re still kind of behind the times still. We’ve come a long way but we still have a ways to go.”

- Participant

“I had a bit of an emotional release once I realized that the person at the other end of the line actually did have a **very good grasp** of the social issue that I was encountering of forced marriage.”

- Participant



Service

Provider Training and Awareness

Participants talked about the positive impact of training frequently in our interviews. Particularly survivors saw the difference that training and knowledge of the issue had on the service and support they received and ultimately their ability to heal and re-build.

Survivors identified three levels of understanding, which they felt led to positive service experiences:

- ① Being open and supportive but needing more training.
- ② Becoming informed through research to provide better support.
- ③ Being informed and knowledgeable already.

The Overwhelming Difference Training Makes

Service providers, participating in the research, who had previously received training around forced marriage talked with more confidence on the issue of and often felt more equipped to respond:

Another participant mentioned the workshops facilitated by the I Do! Project and shared how it encouraged a staff member to build the organizations capacity for helping survivors through her role. One service provider suggested having refresher training courses and updating of resources happening regularly for those who may not see forced marriage cases as frequently, to ensure they continued to be able to identify potential cases and support those individuals properly.

Training and awareness was also talked about at organizational levels where service providers talked about how knowledge on the subject could strengthen intake processes in order to better screen for forced marriage and working with survivors to become more aware of their situation and needs in order to audit agency policies with the hopes to be able to make recommendations on non-invasive policy changes.

“I think that the capacity and the understanding and the insight is there and I think **continual updating** of resources to remind people so that, you know, getting trained once might not be enough if you don't deal with it a lot. It might be an issue that you might want to consider.”

- Participant

“I think training **enhanced some of my sensitivity and awareness** to tackle any preconceived notions or maybe limitations I might have had to the scope of this issue and to whom it affects. It can affect anybody of any background, ethno-cultural backgrounds and especially religious background. Some of the peers who came to speak at the training raised significant awareness about that. And, yeah, there's more I could go onto but I think it helped enhance my sensitivities.”

- Participant

Awareness Building for Prevention

Those at-risk, survivors and service providers participating in the research all talked in length about the importance of raising awareness, particularly amongst teenagers and middle school students and that this had to be a top priority. There was some of this work happening but it was not in a concentrated or mandated way, which participants felt was needed. Overall, service providers were encouraged that more conversations were happening in general around forced marriage in the community but felt that the conversation needed to shift from 'what it is' to 'how to do better.'



“I forgot to mention is so much of what could happen is already happening, it just needs to be re-tooled and there’s so much opportunity in being able to **consult or engage** with survivors to understand how small changes that may mean nothing to the organization or to the system could do for this group.” - *Participant*

“I think that I’m exposed to more opportunities to where this is **a conversation** that’s happening. I think that we’re still unfortunately largely in the infancy piece around the conversation, more around ‘let’s talk about what it is’ versus ‘these are the things that we should be doing to make the system better’ and ‘oh these are the changes I’ve made to make this be not an issue anymore’.” - *Participant*

“I would change people’s **awareness and acceptance**. The only things that will make a difference are people knowing this is happening and that people aren’t just making up weird stories. They also need to know how to help people, especially police and counsellors and anyone who has the job of helping people. **If they don’t believe the person and help them then that person will probably never try to get help again**. That will be the end of their life. They could be dead. Or they could be stuck. Either way they won’t have a life.” - *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 Sign Up For Training:** Look for training in your community, especially opportunities to learn from survivors.
- 3 Be a Voice:** Share what you know, bring the topic of forced marriage up regularly in applicable and strategic situations. Spread the word!
- 4 Be an Advocate:** Be an advocate for survivors by bringing up the topic in your workplaces and with people of authority and through challenging your peers to become better educated, create better policies and provide better support as a result.
- 5 Help Promote:** Advocate for more training and share training opportunities with those who should know about them.
- 6 Learn from First Hand Experience:** Engage someone who knows and understands forced marriage. Have a conversation and share what you learned to help raise awareness.

What Can WE Do?

- 1 Training:** Continue to encourage staff, informal supports and volunteers to learn about forced marriage by encouraging them to sign up for training (that pays attention to intersectionality, trauma and anti-oppression) and bring training into organizations for staff. We can demand the need for training in our community.
- 2 Prevention Strategy:** Develop a community strategy for raising awareness and focusing on the prevention of forced marriage. This includes programming/training across agency platforms with those at-risk, workshops in schools and with community leaders and engaging those at-risk in solutions, while also looking at procedures and policies at the agency and community levels.
- 3 Raise Awareness/Campaign:** Continue to work to raise general community awareness through campaigns. An example of such is the I Do! Project's campaign (which included ads on local transit).

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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