

# *Identifying and Responding to Forced Marriage:* TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

## 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. In a forced marriage, family members may use emotional and psychological pressure, threaten to disown or abandon the individual, or engage in physical abuse in order to compel an individual to consent or acquiesce. Forced marriage can impact individuals of any age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, national origin, and ethnic or religious background.

## FORCED MARRIAGE IS NOT ARRANGED MARRIAGE

An arranged marriage is one in which the families of one or both spouses take a leading role in arranging the marriage but the choice whether or not to accept the arrangement remains with the individual and their preferences and choices are respected.

**Current child protection systems in the U.S. often face challenges when confronted with forced marriage cases involving minors. Without proper planning, standard responses may put an individual at greater risk of harm.**

## HOW CAN SCHOOL STAFF MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

School staff members play a critical role in recognizing when a child may be facing a crisis and can be a trusted resource that a student can turn to for help. When working with a student who may be facing a forced marriage be sure to reassure them that they have the right to choose whether, when, and whom to marry and that it is not a “cultural issue”. When working with a minor, be sure to explain the limits of your confidentiality and reach out to the Forced Marriage Initiative at the Tahirih Justice Center for support and guidance when working with minors.

## WARNING SIGNS AND RED FLAGS

Below are some common warning signs and red flags that may arise when an individual is facing a forced marriage situation:

- Decline in grades, punctuality, or performance
- Appearing anxious, depressed, or emotionally withdrawn
- Frequent unplanned absences
- Loss of interest in going on to higher education
- Not being allowed to attend extra-curricular activities
- Close monitoring by siblings, cousins, other members of the community or parents
- Fear of upcoming holidays or breaks from school
- Uncertain if returning to school
- Parental request for extended leave of absence
- Siblings who have been pressured to drop out or get married early

### WATCH YOUR BIAS

One red flag alone may NOT be indicative of a forced marriage threat, however, if several are present we encourage asking the right questions.

## HOW WOULD YOU HELP?

Maria is 17. She came to the United States as a refugee with her family and now has U.S. citizenship. Her family began exerting tremendous pressure on her to get married about a year ago, when she was a junior in high school, but Maria refused—telling her parents that she wanted to finish high school and start college before getting married. In response, her father told her that she had no choice but to accept the groom they chose for her, and that they were actively looking for an appropriate husband. Alarmed that she might be facing a marriage before she was done with high school, Maria mentioned her fears about getting married to her school counselor...

# HOW TO TALK ABOUT FORCED MARRIAGE WITH YOUR STUDENT

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- Talk with individuals at risk in a secure and private space – never with other family members present and do not use family members to interpret. If interpretation is needed, use a telephonic interpretation service.
- If a student is hesitant to identify with the term “forced marriage” these questions may be useful:

- » How has marriage taken place in your family in the past? How do you feel about that for yourself?
- » Do you feel you are being pressured to get married before you are ready?
- » Do you feel you have a choice in deciding who to marry?
- » Are you being pressured to marry someone who you do not want to marry?

- Ask about and document the individual’s perception of risk. What will saying “no” to the marriage mean?
- Reassure the individual that no religion sanctions forced marriage.
- Let the individual know they have the right to say NO to the marriage.
- Establish a safe way to communicate and check in moving forward.
- Connect with staff at the Tahirih Justice Center for expert technical assistance. We can provide confidential guidance to youth and adults facing forced marriage situations and those working to assist them.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

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Often teachers and counselors can have conflicts around mandated reporting and students can be wary of the consequences of contacting CPS and the impact that may have on their safety at home and on their family. When working with someone at risk of forced marriage it is essential to:

- Reassure the individual of confidentiality **or explain the limits of your confidentiality**
- Inform the individual if you are a mandated reporter and explain to them what that means

**The first meeting is vital and can make all the difference. If travel is imminent, gather as much information as possible and establish a safe way to communicate moving forward.**

## DO NOT

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- Send the individual away or return them to their family/perpetrators against their wishes.
- Break confidentiality or share information without their express consent.
- Approach family or community members unless the individuals expressly asks you to do so.
- Act as a mediator.

## WHAT TO DO IF A STUDENT IS FACING IMMINENT TRAVEL OVERSEAS

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- Although forced marriages do happen in the U.S., individuals can be taken overseas for marriage. If you think your student may be facing a forced marriage in another country, we urge you to connect with the Tahirih Justice Center for expert technical assistance.
- Inform the student that it can be incredibly challenging to get help overseas. Note that simple things like getting a taxi or ride share or making a phone call can be very difficult. See Tahirih’s *Safety Planning for Travel Abroad* tip sheet (found at [PreventForcedMarriage.org](http://PreventForcedMarriage.org)) for more information.

## RECOMMENDED READING

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*Written in the Stars* by Aisha Saeed  
*Shame* by Jasvinder Sanghera  
*Secrets of the Henna Girl* by Sufia Ahmed  
*Child Marriage in the U.S. Survivor Story Compilation*  
by the Tahirih Justice Center

## FORCED MARRIAGE RESOURCES

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Tahirih Justice Center  
Forced Marriage Initiative  
FMI@tahirih.org | 571-282-6187  
[preventforcedmarriage.org](http://preventforcedmarriage.org)