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# VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

ADDRESSING FORCED MARRIAGE WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## INTRODUCTION

In February of 2013, the *New York Times* broke the story of Amina Ajmal, an American citizen who was held in captivity for three years in Pakistan due to a forced marriage. With the help of family members, Amina sought refuge in an American embassy, and was flown into her hometown in Brooklyn. As a result of this escape, Amina's father ordered the murder of two family members who helped facilitate her escape. In the recent proceedings in a federal court in Brooklyn, Amina's father showed no remorse; on the contrary he reported feeling justified in his actions as he felt his daughter had brought shame to the family by running away from a forced marriage.<sup>1</sup> Amina's experience serves as an example of the dark world victims of forced marriage navigate in order to attain freedom. Individuals like Amina who experience forced marriage are hidden in plain sight within American homes. Some are placed under house arrests while others are forced to cope with living in a forced marriage. There are other victims who are exported abroad and kept in isolation. At the most violent end of the forced marriage spectrum are victims who disappear, are killed, or are driven to suicide.

Therefore in order to honor individuals like Amina, this study aims to contribute to the paucity of information that exists on forced marriage within the United States by presenting findings from a multi-method research study that includes an analysis of the following: 1) 524 surveys with students, domestic violence professionals and refugee service providers; 2) 52 case reviews of suspected and confirmed cases of forced marriage; and, 3) 22 interviews with frontline responders. This study is among a handful of studies within the United States that aim to provide information on the responses, remedies, and protections that are available for victims of forced marriage. This paper is the first to present findings from a group of college students on forced marriage,

and the forms of abuse they have witnessed as a result of forced marriage; simultaneously this is also one of the first studies that presents findings from case reviews for 52 reported and suspected cases of forced marriage. Further this paper documents the experiences and recommendations of frontline responders, scholars, activists, and survivors for improving responses to forced marriage. Overall our findings are sobering and highlight the numerous challenges victims, their support networks, and direct service providers face in seeking remedies, protection, and adequate responses against forced marriage.

## STUDY FINDINGS

### QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

Based on an analysis of 524 questionnaires from students, domestic violence professionals, and refugee service providers, we found the following findings.

- Respondents reported 531 cases of suspected and confirmed forced marriage cases.
- Approximately 1 in 3 individuals in our entire study reported known cases (37 percent).
- **Suspected and Confirmed Cases of Forced Marriage:** Approximately 1 in 2 respondents reported coming across at least 1 case of suspected or confirmed case of forced marriage (56 percent).
- Almost 3 in 5 confirmed cases of forced marriage were reported by students (61 percent).
- Almost 2 in 5 confirmed cases of forced marriage were reported by professionals (39 percent).
- Almost 2 in 5 students in our entire sample of 301 students reported witnessing confirmed cases of forced marriage (39 percent).

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<sup>1</sup> Secret, M (2013, May 22). Court Documents Detail a Deadly Family Feud from Brooklyn to Pakistan. *The New York Times*. Accessed from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/nyregion/court-details-fatal-pakistani-us-family-feud.html?pagewanted=all> on July 20, 2013.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN FORCED MARRIAGE

Approximately half of the sample reported coming across emotional violence (55 percent), domestic violence (54 percent), physical violence (51 percent), and depression (50 percent). Overall students reported the highest rates of witnessing forms of violence as a consequence of forced marriage. For each individual form of abuse—with the exception of domestic violence—students reported a higher percentage of witnessing emotional violence, physical violence, financial/economic abuse, and rape as a consequence of forced marriage. For example for the entire sample of students that reported known cases of forced marriage, approximately 2 in 3 reported witnessing emotional violence, physical violence, and domestic violence as a consequence of the forced marriage. We want to emphasize that we didn't measure whether forced marriage existed with these other forms of abuse, but clearly asked whether these forms of violence were the consequence of a forced marriage. Hence our study respondents clearly reported these forms of violence were the consequences of forced marriage.

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The major themes interviewee respondents reported they are coming across on forced marriage include the following:

- Need for Clarity between arranged and forced marriage
- Lack of awareness on the issue of forced marriage
- Cultural Supremacy
- Immigrant and Refugee Resettlement Issues
- No Choice/No Control
- Child Protection Issues

## MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The following list represents the major recommendations interviewees reported. We listed them in order.

- 1) Raise Awareness on Forced Marriage

- 2) Cultural Sensitivity Training for Service Providers
- 3) Services for Victims
- 4) Educate communities on prevention
- 5) Educate the youth
- 6) Collaboration among NGOs
- 7) Multidisciplinary Approach to Cases
- 8) Future research on forced marriage

## CONCLUSION

Our findings demonstrate high rates of secondary victimization reported by youth. For example our sample of questionnaire respondents reported coming across 531 suspected and confirmed cases of forced marriage; we found that most of these cases were reported by students. For example 3 in 5 confirmed cases of forced marriage were reported by students versus 2 in 5 cases being reported by domestic violence professionals and refugee service providers combined. Hence this signals that cases of forced marriage are underreported. Further while we didn't ask youth if they themselves were survivors of forced marriage, or how exactly they came across known cases of forced marriage, we can state that at the least these youth experienced secondary victimization by witnessing a form of abuse such as forced marriage. Many of them also did report witnessing domestic violence, physical violence, rape, and in some of the most severe cases the suicide of someone they know who took their life as a consequence of forced marriage. It is important to note none of the direct service providers reported coming across cases of suicide as a consequence of forced marriage.

These sobering findings coupled with the recommendations of interviewees in our study highlight the need for interventions at all levels of society ranging from the individual, family, community and at the state level. Overall we want to stress that based on interviewees the practice of forced marriage does impact a wide variety of communities in the United States. It does cross religious, cultural, and socio-economic lines.

In concluding we want to highlight that there is a community of deeply concerned, hard-working men and women who are continuously analyzing and assessing the harmful practice of forced marriage in the United States. It is with deep gratitude that this paper was written to document the work of responders that are working to impact the current response to forced marriage in the United States.

