It is never EASY to talk about this

Increasing dialogue, awareness, and victim-centred support for victims of forced marriages

"Never easy"– Enhancing response and support to victims of forced marriage

Best practices booklet

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Universitat de Lleida

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SOLWODI
Solidarity with women in distress
Solidarität mit Frauen in Not

Immigrant Council of Ireland

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Content

Introduction

Forced marriage is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing several intersecting factors that relate to situations in which individuals are compelled to marry or stay married against their will. Forced marriage is widely recognized as a violation of human rights and in particular as a form of gender-based violence and honour-based violence. The harms and negative consequences of forced marriages are multifold and challenge many service providers as well as the criminal justice system.

This report outlines the concrete challenges, factors and concepts that must be addressed when developing effective responses to tackle forced marriages and providing support to victims and persons affected. It is targeted towards various professionals and practitioners who may encounter victims of forced marriage or persons, families or communities affected by the phenomenon in their line of work. The content is based on a desk review of academic and other relevant literature, as well information collected by the EASY project partners: the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations (HEUNI), University of Lleida (Spain), Associació Valentes I Acompanyades (Spain), SOLWODI (Germany), and the Immigrant Council of Ireland, to identify approaches that have relevance in the development of effective and victim-centred interventions for victims of forced marriages.

The best practices were collected mainly via semi-structured (individual or group) interviews with experts and/or survivors, that

were based on a shared interview framework. The interviews were conducted in the summer and autumn of 2023.[1] The experts interviewed included, e.g., NGO representatives and counsellors working with topics related to forced marriage, migrant women's rights, honor-based violence and human trafficking, shelter/residential counsellors, government officials and policymakers, and law enforcement authorities from Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Catalonia (Spain). The survivors interviewed included, e.g., victim-survivors who work as mentors and/or had been supported by the interviewing organisation. Throughout the report there are quotes from the interviews to demonstrate the challenges, experiences and solutions identified.

[1] All interviewees participated voluntarily and filled out a consent form, where details such as the use of the interview data were described. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the help of Nvivo software.

[2] A total of seven interviews were conducted in Finland, but most were group interviews with 2–4 people, which explains the higher number of interviewees.

	Finland	Germany	Ireland	Spain	**Total**
Experts interviewed	14[2]	4	5	6	**29**
Survivors interviewed	-	2	-	2	**4**

Table 1. Number of persons interviewed to collect best practices by each country and in total.

The best practices collected were also shared and discussed with partners in a best practice workshop hosted by SOLWODI in Bonn, Germany on 20–21 November 2023. Each partner identified 4–8 best practices with a focus on themes such as proactive methods to identify victims, engaging with persons from impacted communities and reducing the risk of forced marriage; ways to support and assist victims; training and awareness-raising activities targeting professionals; multi-agency collaboration at local, national and international levels; and municipal, regional or national strategies to tackle or address honor-related violence and/or forced marriages. Ten of the collected best practices were selected and summarised for this publication.

Moreover, in early 2024, the EASY project partners launched a legislative overview which presents the results of comparative desk research on the legal approach to forced marriage in Germany, Finland, Ireland and Spain (Villacampa and Salat 2023). Therefore, this report does not cover legislative frameworks and procedures in place in the four countries to address forced marriages and to protect the victims as they are covered in detail in the legislative overview. The two reports are complimentary. The ultimate aim of the EASY project is to enhance support for victims/survivors of forced marriage and strengthen the work against forced marriage in the four partner countries.

Terminology

Forced marriage is any marriage entered without one or both partners' full or free consent and/or a marriage which one or both parties cannot end or leave from, and it may involve coercion or intensive societal or family pressure.

Human trafficking is a crime in which the perpetrator takes advantage of the victim's dependent status or insecure state to lead them into forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced begging or criminality, illegal adoption, or the removal of organs.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence directed at persons because of their gender or violence that disproportionally affects persons of a particular gender. Examples of GBV include domestic violence, sexual harassment, and forced marriage.

Honor-based violence is violence directed at a member of the immediate or extended family or close community, perpetuated to preserve or restore the "honor" of the family.

Harmful practices are practices involving women and girls that are grounded in discrimination based on e.g., sex, gender, or age and are often justified by invoking sociocultural and religious customs and values, as well as misconceptions related to some disadvantaged groups of women and girls.

Continuum of violence, a concept developed by Liz Kelly (1988), refers to violence (against women) as a normative, everyday practice, instead of focusing on single, severe acts of violence. The continuum or spectrum ranges from behaviors such as misogynist jokes on one end to grave instances of violence on the other. Anitha and Gill (2009) have used the concept to refer to consent and coercion in marriage as "two ends of a continuum, between which lie degrees of socio-cultural expectation, control, persuasion, pressure, threat and force".

Victim/survivor/person affected/person at risk are some of the terms that may be used to describe a person who has experienced or is in threat of experiencing a crime. The term 'victim' is the subject of some controversy in the discussion on people subjected to violent crimes. In this report we refer mainly to victims to denote people who are victims of a crime in a legal and moral sense, and to whom the crime has had very concrete consequences in terms of their needs. The alternative term 'survivor' is not always fitting and may even cloud the realities such persons face. However, we refer to survivor interviews, as persons who agreed to be interviewed can be seen as having survived their experience of forced marriage.

Part I: Forced marriages as a phenomenon – what do we know?

This part examines the definitions and manifestations of forced marriage, the role of family and relatives, and how consent and coercion are at the core of the phenomenon.

1. Defining forced marriage

There is no internationally agreed-upon unequivocal definition of forced marriage per se, but it can be described as a situation where a marriage is entered into without the free and full consent of one or both parties because of threats, deception and/or coercion (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA 2014). Such coercion can range from physical violence to various forms of psychological, financial, or emotional pressure, most often perpetrated by family members or relatives of the victim.

In the 2014 the United Nations General Assembly declared that forced marriage is a harmful practice that violates human rights and is linked to other harmful practices and human rights violations and that such violations have a disproportionately negative impact on women (UN General Assembly 2015). In fact, the right to a 'free and full' consent to a marriage is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Article 16). Moreover, it is recognized that consent cannot be 'free and full' when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, also states that men and women should have the same right to enter a marriage, freely choose a spouse and have the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution. It also condemns child marriage.

Following a broad definition, even initially consensual marriage can turn into forced marriage. If one of the spouses is unable to break away from the marriage due to pressure from their families or relatives in the form of threats, coercion or force, it may be a case of forced marriage or trafficking for the purpose of forced marriage (UNODC 2020, 70).

Chantler & McCarry (2020, 91) and Hong (2020) suggest that forced marriage should be understood as a process and a behavioral pattern rather than as a single event, including cases where persons have not yet been forced to marriage but are at risk of becoming forced. Indeed, exertion of physical force is not needed for a case to qualify as forced marriage. When the control is not physical, the victim may not be aware of their own situation at the time of abuse or may consider it completely normal.

2. Who are the victims of forced marriage?

When I was already 18, my parents chose someone for me. I had never seen this person before in my life. I didn't know this person. Not once have I seen this person. He came to our house, as it is traditional in our country, he came and asked my father if he can marry his daughter. (Germany, survivor interview 2)

Various factors and root causes, such as poverty, social exclusion, patriarchal relations, unequal power distribution, control over women's bodies and sexuality, gender stereotypes, prejudice, and the women's economic dependence can elevate the risk of forced marriages (e.g., European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA 2014; National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children 2016; Törmä, Tuokkola, and Hurtig 2013).

While forced marriage disproportionately affects women, it is important to acknowledge that boys and men can also be forced to marry.

For instance, LGBTQIA+ individuals may experience pressure to marry in order to conform to perceived gender norms (Hansen et al. 2016, 48–49; M. M. Idriss 2022, 2–5; Samad 2010, 199–200). This was also discussed in the Finnish expert interviews:

Men also are victims of forced marriage. In different situation it can be the family who organised [the marriage] for kind of money thing or heritage or whatever, but also it can be people who belong to sexual and gender minorities who are forced into marriage. (Finland, expert interview 2)

Additionally, heterosexual men may be compelled by their parents to marry rather than have the autonomy to choose their own spouse when they feel ready to marry. However, it is often more challenging for men who are victims or at risk of forced marriage to share their experiences due to factors such as shame, fear, and societal expectations of masculinity (Hansen et al. 2016, 48–49; M. M. Idriss 2022, 5–6).

The consequences of marriage and the violence faced by girls and women forced to marry may be more severe than for boys and men.

Various vulnerabilities are intrinsically linked to cases of forced marriage (Askola 2018; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA 2014; Quek 2018). For example, for young people with a refugee background and newly immigrated to the country, vulnerability can mean limited knowledge of the country's legal system and available options, fear and distrust of the authorities, low socio-economic status, limited language skills and social networks, as well as previous experiences of racism and discrimination (e.g., Askola 2018; Hong 2020).

Looking at victims of forced marriages through an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991), it is possible to see how different aspects such as gender, age, class and migration status as well various inequalities at different levels intersect and overlap and how various identities and social positions can affect the rights and opportunities of victims. This approach considers not only individual factors but also all the disadvantages that limit the opportunities of the victims (e.g., Anitha & Gill, 2009; Askola, 2018, 980–981; Viuhko, 2019).

3. Consent

It happened when I was 16 or 17. They didn't propose anything to me. They just told me that this is what it was, that I was marrying this boy and nobody asked me anything. Obviously I refused, but my opinion didn't matter to them at all. (Spain, survivor interview 2)

Consent is a key issue in differentiating forced marriages from other types of marriage.

However, it is not easy to verify consent, as it is linked to social systems of family and marriage that are determined by symbolic and cultural characteristics, which vary among different cultures. (UNODC 2020, 70) In very abusive situations, the victim's consent should not be considered a mitigating factor, taking into account the dynamics between the victim and the abuser, the power structure, psychological and other control, and possible manipulation (Pihlaja & Piipponen, 2023, 22).

Previous research (Hong 2020; Pihlaja and Piipponen 2023, 21–24; Toivonen 2017; UNODC 2020) indicates that a person may simply be unable to refuse the marriage, as refusal to marry may lead to anger and rejection by the whole community. The idea of free will and consent to marry is a somewhat abstract and complicated concept, as they are, in these cases, often rooted in traditions (Toivonen 2017; UNODC 2020, 70). Legitimate consent for a commitment akin to marriage necessitates decision-making capacity, knowledge, ability, and adequate time for thoughtful consideration, which is free from coercion, persuasion, or manipulation. Such conditions are seldom met in instances of forced marriage.

Some experts argue that valid consent cannot be granted for a human rights violation like forced marriage. (Toivonen 2017, 13.) For instance, individuals with a migrant background who are compelled into a forced marriage in their home country might not have had a genuine opportunity or understanding to challenge the impending marriage or reject it prior to entering into the marital union, even if their true intentions did not align with the decision to enter into the marriage (Pihlaja and Piipponen 2023, 21).

Case example from Finland:

The victim is a woman from Central Asia who is now in her late 20s. She was forced to marry her cousin. The marriage was decided upon by her parents when the cousins were small children. The woman had repeatedly rejected the marriage, but she was forced into it by her family. There was physical, psychological and economic violence during the marriage.

The woman wanted a divorce but the husband berated her, saying he had saved her by bringing her to Finland, and that it cost a lot of money to bring her into the country and she should pay this money back to him. Her family also pressured her to stay in the relationship. They said she was a bad daughter, a bad wife and should be ashamed of anting to leave the marriage. They stated that it was the woman's responsibility to keep her husband happy, and that then he would become a good husband.

The woman's uncle (the husband's father) put a religious curse on her, which to this day, the woman believes is the reason for her unhappiness and challenges in life. The woman was able to escape to her neighbor's apartment, who then contacted the police, and she was referred to a shelter.

4. Manifestations of forced marriages

According to the 2022 report produced by ILO, Walk Free and the International Organization for Migration, the number of men, women, and children living in forced marriages has risen globally. In 2021, an estimated 22 million people were in a forced marriage. There has been a 6.6 million increase between 2016 and 2021. (International Labour Organization ILO 2022.)

Regardless of the geographical location, various factors contribute to the occurrence of forced marriages, such as, cultural expectations or norms, agreements between families and relatives, financial distress, debts and other financial motives, or marriage migration schemes.

This was discussed also by the interviewed experts:

Whenever a girl is subjected, threatened or coerced into marrying someone imposed by the family, it is because she is part of societies in which the role of women is one of submission to the will of the group. They are communal societies in which everyone has their own role, and the woman's role is clearly not a free one. She cannot choose her own life project, let alone the person she wants to marry or mate with. This is a very common situation. (Spain,expert interview 2)

Arrangement of (forced) marriage can also be an attempt to control a young person's sexuality and preserve the honor of the family or kin, as well as an outright criminal activity in selling a person for marriage in exchange for money or gifts. Drawing the line between the different reasons is not always easy, because forced marriages can be influenced by different motivations that are all linked together. For example, in many countries, marriage traditions dictate that money and/or benefits are exchanged between the families of the spouses in the form of a bride price or a dowry (UNODC 2020, 68).

It is crucial to frame forced marriages as a phenomenon that can touch persons of all backgrounds and circumstances rather than associating it only with certain groups, cultures, or religions.

In the European context, forced marriages are frequently associated with specific cultural minority communities and migrant groups, where family and relatives play a crucial role in marriage decisions (Anitha and Gill 2009, 5; Askola 2018; Hong 2020; Villacampa and Torres 2021, 2). In the media, forced marriages are often stereotypically seen as an issue that concerns, in particular, South-Asian and Muslim cultures and are not seen as manifestation of violence against women (M. Idriss 2015, 3). Although forced marriages are not exclusive to particular religions, they are linked to cultural and traditional influences (Igareda et al. 2016, 30–31).

Within Europe, forced marriage can also occur in conservative religious communities like Jehova's Witnesses and Laestadians[3], characterized by strong male dominance over women (e.g. Linjakumpu, 2015). The characteristics of forced marriage within closed communities in the Western world can also be observed, for instance, in Fundamentalist Mormon communities, where religious ceremonies facilitate polygamous marriages between underage girls and older men (Quek 2016). However, these communities often tend to be forgotten in discussions about groups susceptible to forced marriage.

[3] Laestadianism is the largest pietistic Lutheran revival movement in the Nordic countries.

Beyond religious groups, communal cultures, and closed communities like some Roma communities, also exhibit characteristics of honor cultures (e.g., UN Women 2019). These traits can subject women and young individuals to communal violence, encompassing forced marriages and child marriages involving at least one party below 18 years old (e.g., Psaila et al. 2016). Such instances involving Roma and/or Traveller children have also been encountered at least by the interviewed Spanish and Irish experts. Some of the instances can be linked to human trafficking and forced criminality, as described by the interviewed Spanish expert:

On the other hand, in these cases more linked to the Roma ethnic group, it is true that we are talking about minors who have been bought and sold and who have also been exploited not only through forced marriage, but also for other purposes of exploitation, such as begging or forced criminality. (Spain, expert interview 1)

5. The role of family and relatives

Family and kinship relationships are both a key vulnerability factor and an integral part of the lives of those at risk of forced marriage (Askola 2018, 995). These include e.g. intergenerational, and extended family relationships, community dynamics and the potential roles of mothers as perpetrators of abuse in relation to children, especially daughters (Aplin 2017; Askola 2018, 998).

There is also a long history of practices in which marriage has been used as a strategic tool for achieving economic, political and/or cultural goals or to gain social capital and elevate the status of certain families. Thus, by marrying off their daughters, the families can obtain some benefits and (financial) security (Psaki et al. 2021; UNODC 2020, 35). Recognizing this layer of vulnerability is critical to understanding why so many victims of forced marriage or those at risk of forced marriage do not seek help as outlined by the interviewed Spanish expert:

We think that more than deception, it is pressure from the family and the whole community. What has been explained to them is that this is the way things are done and no other way. We see it from our Western values, but if we try to put ourselves in their place, their situation is very complicated because to get out of there they have to break with their family, and that is not easy. (Spain, expert interview 5)

Victims of forced marriages encounter pressure, violence, threats and coercive behavior displayed by family members, the community, and others in an attempt to force them to follow instructions (e.g. Dank et al. 2017, 6–8). They include pressures related to one's family, culture and immigration status, e.g.,

- religion, e.g., in situations where victims experience manipulative religious reasoning to convince them to marry;
- strong cultural expectations of marriage by certain age, particularly for women;
- families' refusal to accept the partner chosen by the victims themselves;
- pressure to marry an individual with legal immigrant status that would provide a direct path to citizenship;
- parents' fear of excessive "westernization" of their child.

The pressure most commonly comes from the close family members of the victims. The pressure exerted by the family can range from weekly to daily gentle reminders, that the person has to start focusing on getting married, to extreme threats such as saying a parent or grandparent would commit suicide if the victim does not agree to the marriage. (Dank et al. 2017, 6–8.)

The circumstances and vulnerability factors that influenced on the background of the forced marriage situation may have often arisen over the years, or they have been an integral part of the victim's life, for example through the customs of the community or childhood home conditions (Pihlaja & Piipponen, 2023, 21). The ability to reject marriage may be compromised when other women in one's family or community have experienced similar situations.

Family members pressuring or coercing a victim into marriage might even believe they were acting in the victim's best interest, viewing the marriage as an expression of love, despite the anticipated dynamics and power imbalances within the marital relationship (Kelly 1988; Anitha and Gill 2009; Lilja et al. 2020a; Pihlaja & Piipponen, 2023, 21).

Forced marriages are most often contracted in traditional closed communities where divorce is also often heavily stigmatized: once the marriage is over, the couple is expected to stay together. It is also possible that parents and other relatives who have themselves entered into a similar union are not necessarily receptive to the idea of divorce. (Haenen 2015, 116–117.)

6. Subtle means of control in forced marriage cases

It is common that the means of forcing some to marry are so subtle that they may fall outside the criminal law definitions. They can include elements like intimidation, isolation, and control. This makes the identification of cases of forced marriages not only a challenge for criminal justice actors, but also for social and health services and NGOs. Moreover, it is even more difficult to recognize the situation if legislation or policy define forced marriage narrowly as only applicable to very specific cases (Chantler and McCarry 2020, 106).

The concept of coercive control developed by Stark (2007) is a useful tool to describe the all-compassing phenomenon of forced marriage, and can be used as a lens through which to describe the complex dynamics of forced marriage.

Coercive control refers to subtle controlling behaviour by which the perpetrator of violence coerces the victim, with whom they are in close contact (Stark 2007). It emphasizes that understanding individual acts of abuse requires considering the broader context in which they take place.

An act that seems harmless in one context can be experienced very differently when it is viewed as part of a pattern of behaviour, which has possibly continued for years (Boyle 2019, 22). Based on Pihlaja and Piipponen's (2023) observations and experience in working with clients of Victim Support Finland, for this very reason it may also be challenging for outsiders to identify the abuse and the underlying dynamics behind it, and to understand why the victim did not leave the situation, even if they were seemingly free to walk away and ask for help.

There is a lot of fear and uncertainty. And of course men can deliberately stir up this fear again in order to continue to bind the woman to them. (Germany, expert interview 1)

Many of the interviewed experts in Germany, Finland, Ireland and Spain also described the multifaceted and all-compassing forms of psychological, sexual, physical and economical violence, abuse and threats encountered by the victims during their marriage, which can also entail exploitation of their labour not only by their husbands, but also their relatives and family members.

Also, sometimes when they get married, the husband also in most of the cases is very violent. In some of the cases if the husband already has other wives, the other wives have been also violent towards them especially when they are younger. They also have to do a lot of the housework, so it's almost like domestic violence and labour exploitation because they have to be and are treated like servants. (Ireland, expert interview 2)

It may be useful for practitioners to expand their understanding of forced marriage by placing different acts of violence as a "continuum" where one act leads to another. Following this, Anitha and Gill (2009) suggest that placing honor-based violence on the continuum of gender-based violence allows us to see continuities across a variety of cultures, thus challenging the notion that only certain cultural values provide a unique justification for these crimes.

Part II: Consequences of forced marriage and challenges in service provision

This part outlines some of the key consequences of forced marriage, which also hinder service provision to the victims as well as create obstacles in seeking assistance.

7. Consequences and impacts of forced marriage

There are several different types of consequences of forced marriages for the victims. At worst, victims of forced marriage may have been subjected to serious abuse and mistreatment in the context of marriage, including gender-based violence, sexual abuse, rape or forced pregnancy, as well as domestic slavery, forced begging or forced criminality (see also UNODC 2020; Villacampa 2020, 18).

Such experiences can have serious long-term effects on the victims. They can cause severe trauma, anxiety and mental health problems, including self-harm and deprivation self-esteem, shame, guilt, memory loss, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders and depression as well as physical problems such as chronic pain, fatigue, deterioration of condition pre-existing illnesses, injuries, sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive or sexual health complications (Koskenoja et al. 2018, 113; Pascual-Leone, Kim, and Morrison 2017, 56).

This is how a survivor interviewed in Spain described the impact of her being pressured to marry against her will:

I was in a state of depression because I couldn't see a solution. I didn't have the capacity to make a decision because I didn't see myself as valid. I didn't have the financial resources to be able to get ahead. I also didn't have enough information about what I could and couldn't do, etc. [..] I felt bad because I thought [..] that I was the one who was hurting my parents by not following what they considered [marrying their chosen spouse]. (Spain, survivor interview 1)

Other possible consequences of forced marriages include missing out on education, economic dependence, and social isolation (Dank et al. 2017). Many of these adverse effects are more severe for girls and women because of the mentioned gender-specific consequences such as early or forced pregnancy and childbirth (UNODC 2020; Zimmerman, Hossain, and Watts 2011). Resisting or refusing forced marriage can also lead to various harmful consequences, such as violence, ostracism from the family, and social isolation (Askola 2018, 978–980).

Dank and colleagues (2017) interviewed individuals who had escaped forced marriages and faced difficulties in trusting others and challenges in functioning within society. Long-term consequences included lowered expectations with life goals and ambitions. Forced marriage experiences or even the threat of marriage significantly impacted the victims' ability to pursue higher education, affecting their studies due to PTSD, depression, and anxiety. (Dank et al. 2017, 10–11.)

8. Obstacles in seeking help

There are many recognized obstacles which prevent victims of forced marriage from seeking help (e.g., UNODC 2020; Lilja et. al. 2020; Dank et. al. 2017, 10–11). Factors such as fear, dependency and lack of information of rights and available services were also highlighted in many of the best practice interviews conducted in the four countries:

The fear, the pressure. I mean, when you think about how difficult it is for a woman who has been raised in Germany to separate from a partner without something else going on. How bad must it be if that is the only person you have in a foreign country? (Germany, expert interview 1)

The complexity of family and kin dynamics associated with forced marriage is often the factor that leaves the individual with very few options, which often have incredibly large, even unsustainable consequences for their life (Askola, 2018, 996–998). Intimidation and fear of violence, shame, lack of awareness of available help, reluctance to get one's parents or relatives in trouble, and worry about what will happen to siblings are all possible reasons for not seeking help. (Askola 2018, 995–96; UNODC 2020b, 42–43.) Interviewed German experts also pointed out that some victims fleeing prospective forced marriage face problems finding shelters or housing options where they could be accommodated together with their chosen partner.

Living alone, separated from family and community, is also a factor that increases vulnerability, and may increase the pressure to return to a dangerous family situation (Askola 2018, 997). For example, young people who leave home to avoid forced marriage may also be at risk of becoming homeless due to lack of appropriate support, or they may end up in situation of exploitation or human trafficking while they are on the run or during their migratory journey (e.g., Askola 2018; Lilja et al. 2020).

Avoiding forced marriage can thus also trigger the process of human trafficking.

Fleeing a potential forced marriage situation and being abandoned by family, which amounts to having no social networks or support from home, having escaped with no funds or documents, as well as coping with past experiences of abuse, can put young women especially in a

vulnerable position in certain countries, making them easily accessible to human trafficking networks (Lilja et al. 2020, 44–45; Villacampa & Torres 2021, 6). This risk should be taken into account when organizing services for those at risk of forced marriage and victims of forced marriage.

Many women are fearful of the reactions within their community if their experience were to become public knowledge (Villacampa 2020). This could lead to ostracism and stigmatization of the woman, her children and her extended family (UNODC 2020, 42.). Instead, victims of forced marriages may be more willing to use low-threshold services offered by NGOs, crisis centers or health-care services.

Seeking help can be difficult especially for women who have migrated to another country on a spousal visa because they are dependent on their husbands for their residence permit and have poor knowledge of the local language and the services available.

Non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations play a key role in reaching out and providing information to such persons. (UNODC 2020, 42.) Moreover, many dependencies related to accommodation, livelihood, residence permits and child custody can make seeking help difficult for the victims. (Anitha and Gill 2009, 10–12; Askola 2018; Koskenoja et al. 2018; UNODC 2020, 89). One of the interviewed survivors described her difficulties in finding information on available services and options:

It was hard for me to google something like "What's the best way to run away from home?" because my parents followed my every move and looked at all my search histories. How is that supposed to work? I mean, they would barricade me in and never, I wouldn't be allowed to go out at all. (Germany, survivor interview 1)

It may also be challenging for the victims to recognize their own situation as a forced marriage, because the culturally constructed perceptions of forced marriage do not necessarily correspond to their own situation. Furthermore, seeking help may be even more difficult for men in a situation of forced marriage (Dank et al. 2017, 10–11).

9. Challenges in providing assistance to victims of forced marriages

Research findings show that people do not know about the existence of services for victims of forced marriage, and they experience obstacles related to bringing the situation to light or are otherwise reluctant to seek services (Love et al. 2019). Victims of forced marriages are often referred to domestic violence services, which do not necessarily have the skills to recognize violence in connection with a forced marriage, even though intimate partner violence is common in cases of forced marriage (Askola 2018, 998; Jelenic and Keeley 2013, 26; Lyneham and Richards 2014, 27; Tyldum 2013).

According to Lyneham (2013) forced marriage cases are often likely to be detected as incidents of domestic violence and are likely to be treated as such. On the other hand, what makes identifying forced marriage complicated is precisely the fact that perceptions of victims of forced marriage and its features are often related to physical violence rather than mental violence or cultural pressure (Chantler and McCarry 2020, 94).

According to Dank et al. (2017, 13–15), the main challenges in service provision to victims of forced marriage include:

1. clients' lack of knowledge about services related to helping victims of forced marriage
2. obstacles customers face when contacting the services
3. lack of culturally sensitive services
4. the need to increase resources and training to ensure appropriate services for forced marriage clients.

Increasing service provider expertise is crucial to effectively assist forced marriage victims. Clients may hesitate to seek help if they fear discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or religion. Culturally sensitive services that consider backgrounds and values can alleviate these concerns.

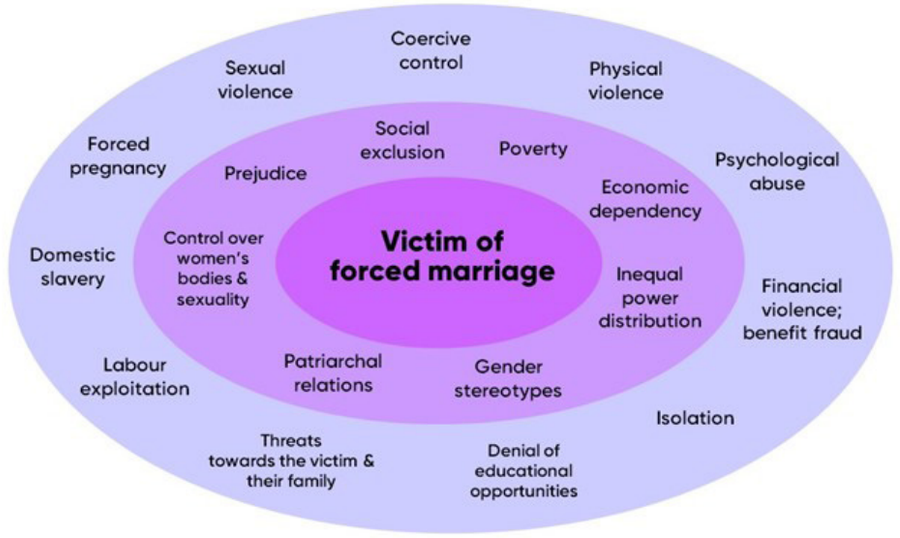
Challenges in services include the need to gain more expertise in involving family members, supporting clients under 18, enhancing women's empowerment and education, and addressing emotional pressure. Safety and emergency plans are beneficial for those at risk of physical violence. (Dank et al. 2017, 13–15.)

Forced marriage, the help you need is not just for getting a divorce, you need so much more. It is so much more than just (forced) marriage, it entails such comprehensive forms of violence: psychological, physical, economical, you name it, they are all present in forced marriages. (Finland, expert interview 7)

Moreover, sometimes the services are not effective, or can have poor results. Villacampa (Villacampa 2020) found that service providers were sometimes unable to understand the complexity of the family situation with sufficient seriousness, which resulted in a worsening of the overall situation. The support team should understand the victim's situation and community norms but connections to the victim's community and the support person's age may also impact their views on marital practices (Villacampa 2020, 16). This was also highlighted in the expert interviews in Finland and Spain.

In conclusion, the following graph summarises the complex and multifaceted nature of forced marriages and related factors and challenges, as well as the forms of violence and consequences of such marriages. Service providers should take note of these factors when designing interventions, engaging with communities and groups at risk, and providing services for victims of forced marriage.

Graph 1. Factors and root causes of forced marriage (middle ring) and the means, manifestations and consequences of forced marriage (outer ring).



Part III: Best practices to address challenges in victim services

This part outlines the assistance needs of victims of forced marriage and persons at risk and describes some of the key best practices from Germany, Finland, Ireland and Spain which have been developed to provide services to such persons.

10. Responding to the needs of the victims and persons at risk

Victims of forced marriages and persons at risk have various assistance needs based on their individual circumstances. These were also highlighted in the best practice interviews.

Help and services are often needed with both short- and long-term assistance, e.g., with issues related to

- first with accommodation and physical security, later with finding permanent housing
- residence permits
- divorce or marriage annulment
- child custody
- physical and mental health, such as doctor and possible therapy appointments
- social services
- daycare for children
- family/social relationships
- economic security and jobs.

The victim's long-lasting subordinate position may increase the need for intensive support even in everyday matters, such as handling money matters or using public transport (e.g., McCarthy 2018). Also interviewed Finnish experts emphasised the need for comprehensive support:

The kind of person who has been totally repressed, that she is empowered and learns to do these things, it doesn't happen very quickly. When she moves to a new home under a new identity, apart from psychosocial support, she needs practical help on how to pay bills, how to use a bank card. There isn't really help for that. Usually it's social services, the social worker who has time to visit once every two weeks, and it may not be nearly enough. (Finland, expert interview 4)

The interviewed survivors highlighted various types of assistance they had received. A survivor interviewed in Germany described how she was made aware of the available services during a meeting:

When I had my social workers around me, there were so many possibilities, such endless possibilities, that I said, "Wow, I didn't find all that myself." (Germany, survivor interview 1)

Moreover, the victims of forced marriage interviewed in Villacampa's (2020) study concluded that they would need an empowerment process where they are heard and understood, as well as distance from their family of origin, at least temporarily. During the empowerment process, the victim should receive comprehensive help – emotional and psychological support, emergency shelter and long-term accommodation, financial assistance, job opportunities, and a culturally aware support network and professional training – from people who understand the complexities of family conflict (Villacampa 2020, 358–359).

11. Best practices in victim service provision

Several best practices were identified regarding service provision to victims of forced marriage in the four countries. They are mainly provided by NGOs, some of which also run shelters and/or crisis centres targeting migrant women and girls, in particular. Comprehensive services are needed to respond to the individual needs of victims and persons at risk, as in the best practice identified from Spain.

Best practice 1. Spain – Support programme for victims of forced marriage

ViA (Associació Valentes I Acompanyades) is a Catalonian NGO set up in 2014 with the aim of combating forced marriages as a form of violence against women that threatens their freedom and their physical and emotional integrity. Its work focuses on the following three areas:

- Prevention through a temporary housing resource and psychological care for adolescent girls who are being pressured into or at imminent risk of being married against their will.
- Intervention through making an individualized plan according to each victim's specific needs, in which the organization helps the women confront their situation and empower them.
- Awareness-raising through a communication plan based on carrying out different initiatives to inform the society of forced marriage with the aim of improving the detection of cases.

In addition to material assistance covering basic needs such as housing, ViA emphasizes support in the women's emotional and psychological recovery process, and educational empowerment. The organization directly assists around 40 women or girls a year, and assists, trains, and cooperates with other actors working in the area. ViA also organizes awareness-raising events at local schools, where one of the objectives is to strengthen the self-confidence and autonomy of young people. Some of their previous clients who have successfully completed their recovery process work at ViA as mentors for girls of the same cultural background who are currently receiving assistance.

Shelters or other housing services are important for (potential) victims of forced marriage, because to disentangle from the situation, the victim needs to physically leave their home, both to distance themselves from the family and community involved in the process of forced marriage, their spouse as well as to ensure their own safety.

Things like [separation] don't always go smoothly. Under certain circumstances, women can run the risk of being subjected to violence, and it is important to ensure that they are accommodated in a protected environment. […] In my opinion, there is a complete lack of awareness of how dangerous such things can be for women and that anonymous accommodation is often the only way to protect these women. I mean, it is a huge problem throughout Germany that there are simply far too few places for such women. That would also be an important point: supporting education, offering protection, providing legal support. (Germany, expert interview 1)

A best practice regarding a dedicated shelter for victims of forced marriage was identified in Germany.

Best practice 2. Germany – Bavarian shelter for young women affected by forced marriage

The women's shelter Scheherazade in Bavaria, Germany, founded in 2012, supports girls and women (aged 18–21) affected by forced marriage. The location of the shelter is confidential, and it accommodates women of all kinds of backgrounds for up to ten weeks. In 2022, there were 760 overnight stays in the shelter. The clients originate from, e.g., Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Balkan countries and African countries – some have a German nationality while others have a (temporary) residence permit. The shelter also runs a hotline, mainly receiving calls from women, but sometimes also from men who are being forced to marry.

The shelter cooperates with an receives referrals from schools, social workers, authorities such as the police, job centres, but also from other women's shelters, counselling centres and assistance network offices. In addition, women themselves or their friends, relatives or acquaintances may contact the shelter.

Beyond housing and shelter, the survivor interviewees as well as the interviewed experts emphasized the importance of social and psychosocial support for persons affected by forced marriage.

Above all, [victims need] emotional and psychological support. Everything else will work itself out, but without therapy you won't recover. (Spain, survivor interview 2)

According to the interviewed experts, ideally, the support should be provided by a professional specialised in the subject of forced marriage. While psychosocial support may take the form of therapy or counselling, social support can include, for instance, having a support person that can accompany the victim through different procedures such as filing a police report, going to an interview, looking for a home or a job, or applying for financial support. Such best practice examples were identified in Finland and Germany.

Best practice 3. Finland – Shelter and crisis centre for migrant women

MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association, Finland (Monika-Naiset liitto ry) is a Finnish umbrella organization of multicultural women's NGOs that helps and supports women who have migrated to Finland. MONIKA runs a Crisis Center which assists migrant women who have experienced violence, or the threat of violence free of charge, anonymously and without an appointment. The center offers crisis help; psychosocial support; counseling and guidance; support for victims of human trafficking, forced marriage and honor-related violence; supported housing after the shelter period; and peer support in groups. The NGO also runs a shelter "Mona" which operates on a confidential address and offers crisis assistance and safe housing in Finland's only shelter solely for women and children. Clients can call the shelter at any time of the day if it is dangerous to be at home or in their close community due to a threat of violence.

The services are offered in different languages in addition to Finnish, e.g., Arabic, Dari, English, Estonian, Farsi, French Russian, Somali, Spanish and Ukrainian. In addition, Crisis Center Monika operates a free of charge helpline and a chat service in different languages. In 2022, Crisis Center Monika had 461 clients and was contacted 4960 times. 78 clients were victims of human trafficking. According to feedback collected, 100% of Crisis Center Monika's customers would recommend the service to others. 55% of customers came to the service because it had been recommended to them. The Shelter Mona had 299 clients in 2022. Sources: MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association, Finland, n.d.; 2023.

Best practice 4. Germany – SOLWODI Support Programme

SOLWODI is an NGO that has 21 counselling centres in 18 cities in Germany, 14 women shelters and housing projects, two of them for minors. SOLWODI stands up for the rights of migrant women who have experienced hardship and violence, from human trafficking, sexual exploitation and prostitution, forced marriage to other forms of violence. In 2022, SOLWODI had 2,278 first contacts with clients – 91 were victims of forced marriage, 9 victims of early marriage, and 100 faced the threat of forced marriage (SOLWODI 2023).

The SOLWODI staff consists of experienced social workers. The organization offers victims psychosocial care, organizes medical or legal support, helps in finding housing and jobs, and arranges German language courses and vocational training, for example. The care is always tailored to the specific needs and individual situation of the client in question and aims to support the client's self-determination.

SOLWODI cooperates with different actors in supporting victims of forced marriage, depending on the cooperation concepts of different federal states. The partners include e.g., the police and witness protection, youth welfare office, girls' refuges and shelters, social welfare office, job center, and foreigners' authority. The cooperation concepts outline each actors' tasks as well as how to work together in cases related to forced marriage. SOLWODI also raises awareness on violence against women through e.g., trainings and poster campaigns.

Finally, a survivor interviewed in Spain stated that victims also need economic resources, because money can also be used as a way of control, and many victims do not have access to (their own) money or do not have any previous savings. In the long term, financial independence can be achieved by entering the labour market. Since victims of forced marriages come from different backgrounds, some have the required qualifications or experience while others may need help with accessing educational or training opportunities as well. Several of the interviewed survivors highlighted the importance of education and financial independence in getting control over their lives.

Case example from Germany:

The victim is a young woman from South-East Europe. Her parents began making preparations for her to be wed at the age of 19. When choosing a future husband for her, the parents made sure that he was as wealthy as possible, because they expected their daughter to be able to provide for them through a profitable marriage.

The woman did not want to marry, and especially not a man, as she was attracted to women. The family became very angry at her refusal and began to threaten her. She fled to Germany with her brother. Although she seemed to flourish in Germany, her relationship with her brorther deteriorated. He controlled her and, on behalf of their parents, was supposed to make sure she remained "pure" and did not tarnish the family honour, because she was soon to be married off.

The pressure from her family took a mental toll on the woman. She participated in an NGO-organized business management course and had hopes of self-employment. However, her prospects of staying in Germany were slim and preparations for her to leave the country began during the course. She dropped out of the course, gradually lost contact with the NGO staff, and her current whereabouts are unknown.

12. Proactive methods to engage with persons from impacted communities and share information on rights

Many of the interviewed experts highlighted the importance of using proactive methods to work together with impacted communities and to provide information and low threshold consultations e.g., in cooperation with schools, youth services and other relevant actors. Preventative work with families, young people and communities were identified as best practices in the four countries by the interviewed experts, as in this best practice from Finland.

Best Practice 5. Finland – Loisto Setlementti's Sopu work

The Finnish NGO Loisto Setlementti has worked on the prevention of honor-related violence and supported young people and families in honor-related crises and in conflict situations since 2012 under the title of "Sopu work" (Sopu in Finnish means harmony). Loisto Setlementti is a part of the Finnish Federation of Settlement Houses and operates in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The organization works closely with migrant services, municipal social services, police, healthcare, shelters, reception centers, child protection services, schools and NGOs in the capital region, and trains professionals.

As part of the Sopu work in the years 2018–2021, the Bahar project funded by STEA (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health) worked with young people who faced honor-related violence. The Bahar project targeted young people who were separated from their families due to violence or the threat of it, or whose families had rejected them due to a conflict related to honor. All services were free of charge, and also undocumented young migrants were able to participate. The service model was based on best practices observed in the Sopu work. The work was based on principles of "cultural sensitivity and humility", which meant respecting the right of every person and family to be experts of their own lives and to define what the words culture or honor meant to them.

The Bahar project had clear overall goals and expectations. These included:

1. supporting the creation of safe spaces and new social relationships for young people who have faced honor violence;
2. offering professional and peer support (personal and/or group support) to the young people of the target group in order to gain more trust in others, better self-esteem and mental health; and
3. supporting greater independence in everyday life and creating a stronger sense of belonging in the group.

A special service plan was made with each Bahar participant, which listed the goals specifically set and formulated in cooperation with the participant. Follow-up interviews and questionnaires were used to evaluate the achievement of the goals. Some of the participants' achievements included having a better housing/study/work situation; obtaining a residence permit; better mental health; less alcohol abuse and risky behaviour; stronger self-esteem and independence; and more trust in the authorities. Although the Bahar project came to an end in 2021, Loisto Setlementti's Sopu work is ongoing.

Continuous, proactive community engagement was also highlighted as a best practice by Irish experts as a way of tackling forced marriage in a culturally sensitive way while making sure there are no misunderstanding about the laws and norms of host communities by the migrant or ethnic minority communities. Moreover, this type of work may allow for victims still trapped in forced marriages to become aware of the fact that forced marriage a crime and that there are pathways to exit the situation and get the help they may need.

There should also be bottom-up approaches whereby the community is empowered to identify these issues and then you work with other stakeholders in an environment of trust. (Ireland, expert interview 3)

Best Practice 6. Ireland – Community navigators

The Immigrant Council of Ireland launched a community navigator programme in 2021 and is continuing it within the framework of the EASY project. Community navigators are (women) members of the community who are recruited and receive specialised training in order to be able to provide information on, e.g., legal topics and available services for their and other marginalised communities. Community navigators are a response to the issue that appropriate information rarely reaches migrant communities who are mostly affected by the hidden cultural practice of forced marriage. The navigators prioritize outreach activities in relevant locations and may use the support of gatekeepers (such as churches, mosques and local business owners) within communities to access different groups of women. In the 2021 programme, the navigators met more than 300 community members.

Similarly, a Spanish expert raised the importance of working together with leaders or mentors of the affected communities, who understand the legal reality of the issue in the country of residence and can convey this information in the communities. On the other hand, they can "translate" the cultural discourse and context to local support workers to help create more appropriate intervention methods. They can also help with the identification of cases.

It is about us having an understanding of other realities that are in society and that we have no idea about, that we know nothing about. We must work from an intercultural perspective and at different levels. We must be more receptive. (Spain, expert interview 4)

Best Practice 7. Finland – Setlementti Tampere's DIDAR – Working with cultural notions of honor and the harmful traditions that result from them

DIDAR is part of Setlementti Tampere's unit on Violence Work. DIDAR's work focuses on cultural notions of honor and resulting harmful traditions. DIDAR organizes discussion groups, activity groups, dialogue workshops, camps and events, as well as individual and family work for people from different cultural backgrounds. Participants are encouraged to talk about and reflect on notions of honor and human rights. The aim is to prevent conflicts and violence related to honor, and to support people in finding ways of acting in different situations that respect everyone's human rights. The word didar means meeting in Persian and Kurdish languages.

DIDAR also offers conversational help and guidance for conflict situations arising from notions of honor and in situations where violence has already been used or the threat of it has been observed. In these cases, the employees help to map the situation and strengthen the safety of the people involved, if necessary, together with other assistance providers involved in the situation. They may also communicate with, for instance, an imam. The goal is to support genuine dialogue between different parties and the finding of non-violent solutions. The services are free of charge and open to everyone. DIDAR also consults and trains professionals in issues related to honor, and published a manual titled "In the cross-pressure of honor and shame – A guide for professionals to confront perpetrators of honor-related violence" in 2016 (in Finnish).

A Finnish expert interviewee stated that there should be more opportunities for preventive work, through grassroots outreach work and cooperating with, e.g., imams, who are central figures in many communities. They argued that preventive work is the most cost-effective option which also reduces human suffering – without it the work becomes more about "putting out fires".

In addition to working with families and communities, distributing information and raising awareness, the role of schools was highlighted by interviewed experts in the four countries. In Spain, they have for example put up information posters in schools with a QR code.

Schools are obviously an important element of prevention because they have a great potential for proximity to girls. It is necessary to provide training so that they can detect and prevent [forced marriages]. Workshops can also be held in high schools and schools, specialised workshops can be held in which forced marriages are placed within the context of gender-based violence or in which it is explained what they represent. (Spain, expert interview 2)

However, a challenge that emerged from the interviews was that since many of the preventative and victim support activities are organized by NGOs and the work of NGOs is often project-based, the future of funding can be uncertain. Consequently, there is a risk that good practices established within project work cannot be implemented long-term due to a lack of continuous funding.

Part IV: Multidisciplinary collaboration at the local, national and international levels

This part describes the roles of collaboration and strategies in tackling forced marriage and introduces some of the related best practices from the partner countries.

13. Criminal justice system and best practices in cooperation between NGOs and law enforcement

Compared to more widely recognized forms of intimate partner violence, many victims of forced marriage may be very reluctant to trust the authorities if they come from marginalised communities where people often have negative experiences with the criminal justice actors or process (Askola 2018, 998). Such sentiments were echoed also by many of the interviewed experts in the four countries, including an Irish expert:

We however need stronger communications with migrant communities so victims know that they can come forward and get support. (Ireland, expert interview 5)

Victims' reluctance to approach the authorities may stem from concerns about implicating their parents, triggering potential retaliation from their husbands, or tarnishing their family's reputation (UNODC 2020, 42). This was evident also from one of the survivor interviews:

I wasn't able to make a complaint of my parents. I was thinking about the family I lived with. But, thinking about the repercussions it could have for my parents on an emotional level, I wasn't able to make the decision. It came out as a resounding no because apart from the emotional burden it could create for me, I didn't want to face legal proceedings. (Spain, survivor interview 1)

Moreover, previous research has presented cautionary views about using only criminal law as a tool to combat forced marriages, as this can lead to a situation where the victim may be forced to report their own family members to get legal protection (Villacampa 2020, 18; see also UNODC 2020, 42). It may thus be easier for victims and persons at risk of forced marriage to seek assistance at least first via NGOs and to take some time to consider whether to contact the police about their situation.

Interviewed Finnish experts highlighted the importance of going over what filing a criminal report means, so that the victim has all the necessary information to make an informed decision.

Many times with my clients – they might in the end like to withdraw from the whole process because they get scared, because suddenly they are involved in so many processes that probably they didn't fully grasp what it implies, what it means. […] It's a duty of the social worker or someone to explain those and offer those, to work slowly and make sure that the person knows that they can take some time to think, and that you can think of different scenarios together, like if we do this, what happens? What will your family say? If we do a crime report, what happens when the information goes to your husband or ex-husband. (Finland, expert interview 2)

Some of the interviewed survivors in Spain and Germany had reported their case to the police and had excellent experiences, while others decided not to approach the law enforcement authorities at all, as mentioned previously. An interviewed survivor in Germany highlighted the importance of meeting an encouraging police officer, who treated her with respect:

The police officer who was responsible for me supported me all the time. He said we would do this and that and we would take care of your documents. […] We'll take care of everything. He always gave me this encouragement and this courage, and to this day I am still very, very grateful to him. (Germany, survivor interview 1)

Similarly to the survivors, also the interviewed experts from victim services in the four countries had both positive and negative experience of dealing with law enforcement authorities.

The possibility of having an anonymous meeting with the preventative police unit in the premises of an NGO or a shelter was identified as a best practice both by the police as well as several Finnish NGOs who assist victims of forced marriages. Having such meetings to consult with the police can significantly lower the threshold for reporting a crime.

Best practice 8. Finland – Helsinki Preventative Policing Unit focusing on prolonged domestic violence and honour-related violence

The pilot group to preventi honour-related violence was founded in the summer of 2022 by the Helsinki police department. The unit has developed working methods to prevent honour-related violence and cases of prolonged domestic violence, and has strengthened cooperation with relevant NGOs and other relevant actors, utilising a holistic approach. The group consists of 5 police officers, but they also have social workers, a psychiatric nurse, and youth workers in the unit. Cases of forced marriage are often identified by the unit in the context of domestic violence. A victim of forced marriage who is afraid to file a crime report, can meet with the non-uniformed officers from the unit on a neutral ground, e.g., at the premises of an NGO or a shelter to discuss their options and concerns. This can be done anonymously if needed. They have also developed a questionnaire for interviewing victims of honour-related violence in cooperation with an NGO, which is freely available for the police to use in all police departments in Finland. The group is also keen to develop work with perpetrators as the risk is that the perpetrators in forced marriages will simply find a new spouse to abuse and the cycle of violence will continue.

Another best practice identified in Spain concerns the approach of the Catalan police to tackle forced marriages. It is important to note that it is not necessary for victims of forced marriage to file a formal complaint with the police to access this specialised service.

Best practice 9. Spain – The approach of the Catalan police to FM and the role played by the Victim Assistance Groups

Procedure for the prevention and police response to forced marriages was launched in 2009 by the Mossos d'Esquadra, the Catalan police. Grups d'Atenció a la Víctima (GAV) or victim assistance groups were established as the specialised units in charge of offering protection, monitoring and counselling to victims of violence against women, domestic violence and other vulnerable victims. The police officers who form a part of these units are dedicated exclusively liaising with the victims. The police procedure is more focused on the prevention of forced marriages and on victim assistance than on the investigation and prosecution of cases. The GAVs work in coordination with other actors to address each case in the most appropriate way, providing a response that is adapted to the particular needs of the victims.

In addition, the GAVs are supported by the Grups Regionals d'Atenció a les Víctimes (GRAVs Regional Victim Assistance Groups), which are present in each of the police regions of Catalonia. The regional groups meet periodically with the central services of the Department of the Interior of the Generalitat of Catalonia to evaluate and improve their victim assistance strategies. The GRAVs and GAVs of Mossos d'Esquadra actively participate in the coordination of the victim network care services in their territories.

In the area of assistance, the GAVs usually coordinate with the entire network of social services, especially with social services specialised in assisting women victims of gender-based violence. Outside the field of assistance, the GAVs usually communicate with members of the criminal justice system to ensure compliance with the protection measures ordered by the courts, and also with the Oficines d'Atenció a les Víctimes del Delicte (OAVD), Office for Assistance to Victims of Crime) to check the penitentiary situation of the aggressors.

Overall, there is a need to build capacity of the law enforcement authorities to understand what forced marriage is and to lower the threshold for reporting if more victims are to be encouraged to contact the authorities.

14. National, regional, local, municipal or other strategies to tackle or address forced marriages

It is evident that the abuse, exploitation and violence in the context of forced marriage has a deep impact on the victims.

Responding to their specific needs requires multidisciplinary approach not only from the service providers but also from the law enforcement and other authorities and actors.

Ultimately such cooperation requires strategical processes and development of standard operating procedures and cooperation models as well as the establishment of relevant networks and exchange of information between different actors.

The key best practice identified concerns the protocol for forced marriages which was released already in 2014 in the Girona area, and in 2020 in the whole territory of Catalonia.

Best practice 10. Spain – Catalan protocol for forced marriages

In 2014, the Generalitat of Catalonia launched the Protocol for forced marriages in Girona. Subsequently, in 2020, a protocol aimed at preventing and approaching forced marriages, this time to be applied in the whole territory of Catalonia, was published by the Department of Labour, Social Affairs and Families. The objective of this protocol was to establish a framework of cooperation and a circuit of intervention between the different professionals to prevent, detect and intervene in situations of forced marriage cases and to guarantee that no woman living in Catalonia becomes a victim. In this sense, this document focuses on the rights and needs of women and minors by addressing several key points, such as the different elements and criteria for detecting cases of forced marriage; the legal framework in force at international, European, Spanish and Catalan level; guidelines so that the professionals involved know how to proceed; as well as prevention measures and the different aspects related to the care and recovery of the victims.

The 2020 protocol was revised by the Department of Equality and Feminisms of the Catalan Government, as it is considered that the phenomenon of forced marriage has so far been dealt with as a reality too close to migratory movements when it should be addressed more from a gender perspective. The aim of this revision was to deal with forced marriages not as cultural or religious practices carried out by migrants, as they have been mostly institutionally addressed so far, but rather to reinforce the idea that it is another manifestation of gender-based violence or violence against women. The revision was approved in October 2023 under the title of "Approach Model to forced marriage".

Furthermore, parallel to the revision of the Catalan protocol, some initiatives have emerged at regional level in some Catalan territories that also want to have their own tools to offer a more specialised response to the phenomenon of forced marriage.

In Germany, there is also a federal level network of counselling centres on forced marriage (BuKo) where counselling and accommodation centres from different German States get together annually to network and share experiences and expertise. The network prepares position papers (aimed at political leaders) which outline e.g., policy demands related to the issue of forced marriage, and hosts roundtables. (ALDONA e.V. 2022.)

As the Catalan example shows, a strategic approach towards preventing and addressing forced marriage can be beneficial, as it leads to a more structured way or working, in which different actors are able to cooperate in order to tackle the issue in a comprehensive way and ensure that the victims or persons at risk do not fall between the cracks when in need of services from different entities.

15. Conclusions

This report has highlighted what we know about forced marriages as a phenomenon, its manifestations, profiles of the victims, role of families and relatives and the multifold harmful consequences over the lives of those individuals who have been forced to marry or who have been affected by the threat of forced marriage. In particular women and girls subjected to or at risk of forced marriages frequently face psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, violence and threats, emotional manipulation, coercive control and/or isolation. The victims are often also extremely dependent on their spouses or families in terms of finances, accommodation, food and clothing, residence permits. Such power dynamics can create an additional barrier for victims to seek help as they might implicate their own relatives in the process, jeopardise their residence permit or risk losing their home, income and/or custody of their children.

Key action points

Many of the identified challenges can be solved with innovative approaches that take into account the complex nature of the phenomenon and the individual needs of the victims.

To be able to develop holistic and victim-centered approaches to support victims of forced marriage, professionals need to understand also how their intervention may affect the victims, their families and communities. Indeed, it may be useful to consider forced marriage as a process and a behavioral pattern rather than a single event.

This report has highlighted some of the best practices identified in Germany, Finland, Ireland and Spain to assist and shelter victims, to work together with affected communities and families, to raise awareness, lower the threshold for contacting the law enforcement and to strengthen multidisciplinary cooperation.

1 A holistic, **victim-centered and gender-sensitive approach** is very much the key in responding to the issue of forced marriages.

2 Adapting an intersectional lens, which observes age, race, ethnicity, gender and/or class belonging, for example, allows for a more **nuanced understanding of consent and coercion** in the context of forced marriage.

3 Victims benefit best from **multidisciplinary support**, which is coordinated amongst actors who understand the consequences of forced marriages (including how it affects relations in the family and community) as well as the needs of the victims, and who possess culturally sensitive tools to support victims. Best practices place strong emphasis in the (potential) victims' safety, therapy and their empowerment.

4 Relying solely on the criminal justice approach to tackle forced marriages is ineffective. However, close **cooperation between law enforcement and victims service providers**, including the opportunity to consult the police anonymously, may lower the threshold for filing criminal reports.

5 **Capacity building** of law enforcement and criminal justice authorities to better understand the manifestations and consequences of forced marriage is needed to improve the identification, investigation, and prosecution of relevant cases.

6 Close **cooperation with affected communities** is needed to address and prevent forced marriages, to increase awareness and dialogue, to encourage assistance-seeking and to prevent community shaming, as well as to offer low threshold opportunities for (potential) victims to seek information and support.

7 Development of a joint strategy, guidelines for **co-operation between authorities and professionals** as well as the **establishment of relevant networks** form the basis of a comprehensive approach to protect the rights of victims of forced marriages.

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