

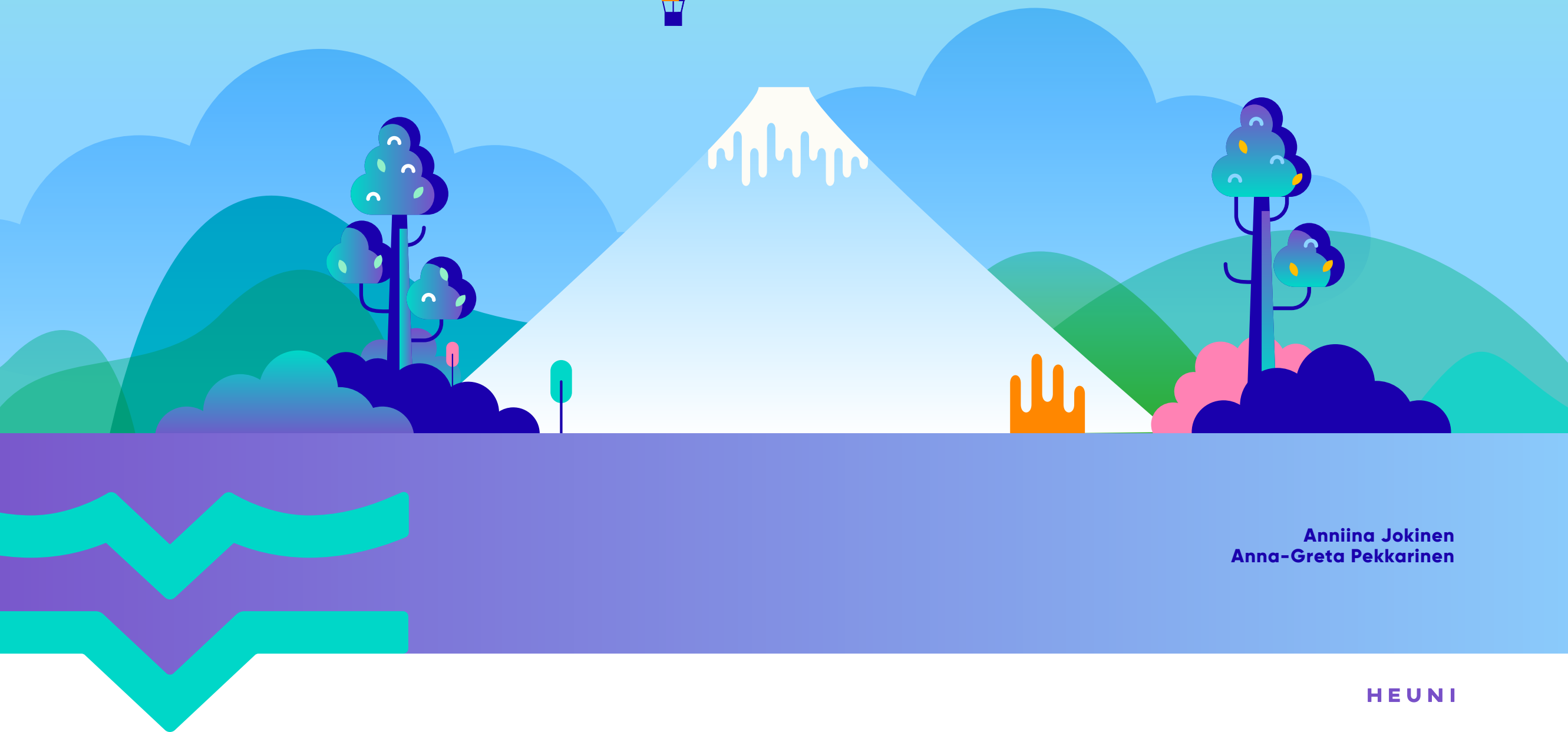
Long Journey

Toolkit for Supporting Victims of Forced Marriage



It is never
EASY
to talk
about this

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



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Introduction

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. This toolbox 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 toolbox features concise information about forced marriage, checklists, as well as a client journey map, which outline the features of forced marriage and concrete factors which professionals must take into account when encountering potential victims and offering them support.

The client journey map describes a process that has been divided into five stages:

- Awareness
- Getting Access to Assistance
- Short term Assistance
- Long-term Assistance
- Empowerment

The content has been developed by HEUNI in cooperation with the EASY-project partners: University of Lleida (Spain), Associació Valentes I Acompanyades (Spain), SOLWODI (Germany), and the Immigrant Council of Ireland. This publication complimentary to two other EASY reports: “Never easy” – Enhancing support to victims of forced marriage (Jokinen, Pekkarinen & Rantanen 2024) and Legal approaches to forced marriage: An overview (Villacampa and Salat 2023). 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.

Forced marriage at a glance

Broad definition

Forced marriage is a situation where a marriage is entered into without the consent of one or both parties because of threats, deception and/or coercion. These acts are most often perpetrated by family members or relatives of the victim, or by their spouse. Even an initially consensual marriage can turn into forced marriage if it is impossible for the person to leave the exploitative marriage.

Root causes

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.

Victim profile

Forced marriage can touch persons of all genders, backgrounds, and circumstances rather than only persons from certain groups, cultures, or religions. Also persons with LGBTQIA+ background can be forced to marry.

Features of forced marriages

Forced marriages often include complex dynamics of violence and harm in which the victims are subjected to. The features may include:

- Psychological, financial, or emotional pressure
- Coercive control
- Threats and isolation
- Sexual abuse and violence, including forced pregnancy
- Physical violence
- Limiting freedom of movement and agency
- Domestic servitude and/or exploitation of labour

Consequences of forced marriages

The harms and negative consequences of forced marriages are multifold. They include:

- Severe trauma, anxiety and mental health problems
- Self-harm and deprivation self-esteem, shame, guilt
- Post-traumatic stress disorder, memory loss, sleep disorders and depression
- Physical problems such as chronic pain, fatigue,
- Deterioration of condition pre-existing illnesses, injuries
- Sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive or sexual health complications
- Lack of access to education and employment opportunities
- Economic dependence
- Ostracism and social isolation from family and local community
- Lowered expectations and ambitions

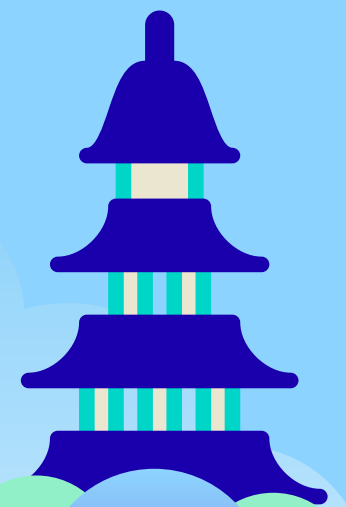
Key takeaways

- A holistic, victim-centered and gender-sensitive approach is a must
- Nuanced understanding of consent and coercion and their consequences is needed
- 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) and is catered according to the individual the needs of the victims/survivors
- Best practices place strong emphasis in the (potential) victims' safety, access to mental health services, and their empowerment in taking charge over their own lives.

Obstacles in seeking assistance

There are many obstacles which prevent victims of forced marriage from seeking help. They include:

- Intimidation, fear and shame
- Lack of awareness of rights and available help
- Reluctance to get one's parents or relatives in trouble
- Worry about what will happen to siblings
- Fears regarding custody of children
- Fear of authorities and deportation



Checklist for identification of forced marriage

Understanding the position of the victim

A victim-centred, trauma informed approach is a way of engaging with victims that prioritises listening, avoids re-traumatisation, and systematically focuses on the person's safety, rights, well-being, expressed needs and choices.

Asking open ended questions invites the potential victims to describe their experiences, thoughts and feelings in their own words. This method offers them more control as they recount times or situations in which they were exploited or threatened.

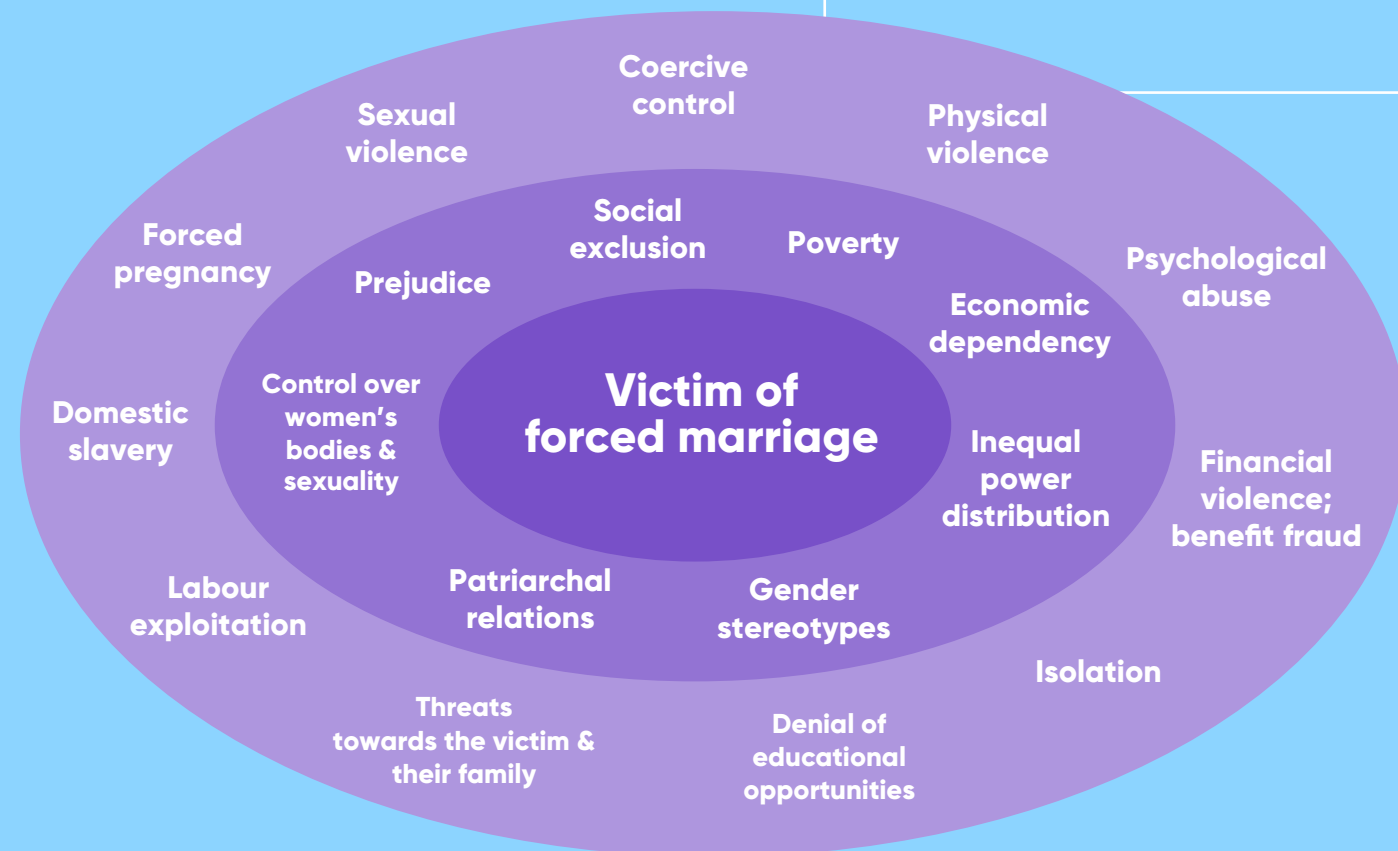
The effects of traumatic experiences can influence persons' behaviour. Traumatic situations may be difficult to recall and describe for many reasons, e.g. because of intense emotional feelings of stress accompanying the memories or difficulties to verbalise their situation.

Signs of forced marriage

A multitude of signs can point out to a forced marriage situation. It is important to focus on the totality of the situation, rather than just focus on individual features of violence and control. Potential signs of forced marriage are listed on the outer ring of the graph on the right side, and root causes are presented in the middle ring.

You should also pay attention to signs of:

- ▣ External control (the person always has an escort, e.g. spouse/relative)
- ▣ Repeated ailments/injuries that do not correspond to the story
- ▣ Avoiding certain topics, explaining them strangely, nervousness and memory problems
- ▣ Lack of information on managing their own affairs



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

What to focus on if you suspect a case of forced marriage

- Try to uncover as much information as possible about everyday life, typical days and daily routines, circumstances of living (room of one's own, sanitation, food), relationships, aspects of control and or freedom.
- Encourage the person to expand on key areas after you have heard their initial story by focusing on invitations. (Tell me...) and cued invitations (You mentioned X, tell me more...).
- Allow the person to express their individual needs, fears and concerns (e.g. safety issues, isolation)
- Be sure to give enough information and time for the person to make their choices.

Tips for the encounters

- ▣ Ensure a safe and calm meeting space, so that you can talk without rushing and without other people within earshot.
- ▣ Make sure you and the person understand each other, use a (trusted and neutral) interpreter, if necessary.
- ▣ Observe, listen actively and strive to build trust.
- ▣ Ask open-ended questions and listen as neutrally as possible, without alarming the person or questioning what they are saying.
- ▣ Tell the person that the situation is not their fault.



Assessing victims' needs

Victims of forced marriage have individual needs which may depend on the situation of the person in question, their profile, age, gender, migration status, as well as skills and capabilities. They might have needs that relate to:

- ❑ Safe housing
- ❑ Social support including access to benefits
- ❑ Medical assistance, including getting access to therapy, gynaecological, prenatal care and sexual health services
- ❑ Psychological support, including support offered to victims of violence provided by victim support organisations, NGOs and other relevant organisations
- ❑ Support with children and their welfare e.g. childcare services, family counselling
- ❑ Legal assistance in filing a divorce and applying for the custody of children
- ❑ Legal assistance related to criminal case and/or residence permits
- ❑ Language courses and access to training programmes, educational opportunities & employment services

Based on the expressed needs of the person, they should be referred to appropriate service providers. It is important to outline the available support and opportunities, but also discuss the consequences.



Remember:

- Forced marriage can touch persons of all genders, backgrounds, and circumstances.
- Being forced to marry and being subjected to violence can significantly affect a person's psychological well-being and their perception of their own rights and what they consider as violence or normal behaviour in the first place.
- Disclosing a forced marriage situation and talking about violence requires trust and time, it may take several meetings for the person to disclose their experience.
- The person does not necessarily want or cannot tell the truth about their situation, or they may want to avoid disclosure for fear of consequences or shame.
- The person may be traumatized, and their mood and ability to take action may vary.
- The person may have been intimidated or given false information.
- Adults have the right to decide for themselves whether they want help.
- The longer the situation has continued and the younger the victim, the greater the impact can be.

- Do you have the opportunity to make decisions about your own life?
- Are you allowed to attend studies or work, if that is what you want?
- Are you allowed to use your phone without anyone monitoring what you do with it?
- Do you feel safe in your home?
- Are you free to choose your spouse or refuse to marry?
- Can you freely file for divorce without negative consequences?

Do you have questions or concerns?

Forced marriage is a crime. You should be able to make decisions about your own life, choose your own spouse and divorce without negative consequences. You are not alone. If you think you or someone you know are a victim or at risk of becoming one, contact:



Customer journey map

THIS NEXT SECTION contains a so-called “customer journey map”. This part is designed to illuminate the process of supporting a victim of forced marriage. Based on a combination of various real-life case examples encountered in our project “It is never easy to talk about this” – Increasing dialogue, awareness, and victim-centred support for victims of forced marriages”, the map outlines the critical stages a victim goes through: Awareness, Getting Access to Assistance, Emergency Support, Long-term Support, and Empowerment. Each stage details the victim's actions, touchpoints, experiences, challenges as well as suggests promising practices, providing a comprehensive overview of the journey.

Purpose of the Journey Map

The journey map aims to enhance understanding and improve the support system for victims of forced marriage. It serves as a visual and practical guide for service providers, helping them identify key moments and opportunities for intervention and support. By mapping out the victim's journey, stakeholders can better address the unique challenges victims face and implement effective, compassionate practices.

The customer journey is exemplified with quotes from a survivor. The survivor's story, which is also written in full on the right, is fictional but based on a combination of actual client stories relayed by assistance providers.

Mina is a 25-year-old woman from Central Asia. She wanted to become a teacher, but she was forced to marry a local man of her parents' choosing at the age of 17. They have lived in Finland for five years and have three children.

The husband has been violent from the start. He is physically and psychologically abusive towards Mina. He controls who she can and cannot have contact with and regularly takes away her keys so that she cannot leave the apartment while he is away. Mina has no cell phone or bank card. He has applied for benefits on her behalf, but the money goes directly into his bank account.

When dealing with, for example, the authorities or health care professionals, the husband always accompanies Mina, explaining that she needs him to translate for her as she barely speaks the local language. However, he has not allowed her to go to language courses or to study, in order to keep her dependant on him.

An event was held near a local playground which Mina visits with her children every now and then. The organizers included women's groups, and one of the women working at the event spoke the same language as Mina. She gave her a leaflet on “living in Finland” in which she came across the topic of domestic violence.

Mina has expressed a desire to leave the husband to her parents, but they are forcefully against the idea, saying that by leaving her husband she would bring shame to the whole family. Her husband has said he would never grant her a divorce and if she even suggested that he would take the children and make sure that she was sent back to their country of origin, where his relatives would take revenge on her and her family.

When things got really bad, Mina borrowed her husband's phone but instead of calling her parents, she dialed the number of an NGO mentioned in the leaflet she received. She was informed of a shelter which she could access with her three children. Once there, it took her awhile to be able to talk about her experiences but the crisis workers, and later, a therapist, supported her.

The NGO workers helped Mina with temporary housing. She got her own bank account to which the benefits were directed. Eventually she received help with filing for a divorce and applying for the custody of the children. They moved to an apartment of their own, and she began taking language courses and later enrolled in studies to become a daycare worker.

Awareness



Victim actions

Touchpoints

Victim experience

Pain points (challenges)

Showing signs of forced marriage (e.g. missing school, always accompanied by spouse, signs of physical violence)

Getting access to information, asking for help

Fear of authorities (regarding custody of children, the police)

Limited knowledge about the country's legal system and available options

Legal status (residence permit)

Involvement of the criminal justice system actors

Lack of identification, lack of low threshold services, language barriers

Referral to services that are not necessarily able to recognize forced marriage (e.g. domestic violence services, health care)

Schools

Social and health services

NGOs

Migration services

SOLUTIONS / BEST PRACTICES

Dissemination of information on rights and where to seek help in schools, among service provider contacts and via leaflets etc.

Students and professionals trained/aware of dealing with topics like violence and forced marriage and what features they entail

"I am a 25-year-old woman, and at 17, I was forced to marry a man of my parents' choosing. We have lived in Finland for five years and have three children. My husband has been physically and psychologically abusive towards me from the start. He controls who I can and cannot have contact with. I have no cell phone or bank card. He applied for benefits in my name but the money goes directly to his bank account."

Getting access to assistance

Pressure related to one's family, culture, or immigration status, stigmatization of separation/divorce

Coercive control
Lack of (independent) access to a smartphone, the internet

Access to education, access to financial resources, access to culturally sensitive assistance/services

Being reliant on family and/or spouse, fear of getting one's family into trouble and of abandonment, worry for siblings

Being able to contact and communicate with authorities/potential assistance providers

NGOs, Crisis centers
Authorities
Hotlines or info/helplines

SOLUTIONS / BEST PRACTICES

Multilingual service provision (incl. hotlines, web-based services)

Knowledge of different service providers and professionals who may encounter victims on where to refer them for help

Holistic view of the situation and the needs of the victim (e.g., not "just" domestic violence, but coercion, psychological abuse, forced marriage, exploitation etc.) and multidisciplinary support

"Whenever I have to go to the doctor's or almost anywhere really, he accompanies me. He doesn't allow me to go to language courses or to study, he wants me to be totally dependent on him. Sometimes I am able to take my children to a playground nearby. One time, there were tents by different women's groups, and they were handing out tea, cookies and leaflets. One of the women there even spoke my language. That's where I came across the topic of domestic violence."

Emergency support

Escaping an immediate threat of violence

Need for emergency housing

Shelters
NGOs

Assistance System for Victims of Human Trafficking

Police

Ensuring the safety of the victim, contact with the police

Access to quality interpreters who are not involved in the same community as the victim and suspect

Pressure or threats from family/spouse/community


SOLUTIONS / BEST PRACTICES

Access to safe accommodation (through e.g. secret address shelters), crisis support, support in potentially contacting the authorities.

Good practice: anonymous discussion with the police on possible options.

"I told my parents about my husband's behavior, but they said I would bring shame to the whole family if I even talked about leaving him. My husband once said that he would never grant me a divorce and would rather take the children and have me sent back home, where his relatives would take revenge on me and my family. When things got really bad, I took my husband's phone and dialed the number of an organization mentioned in the leaflet. They told me how to get to a shelter with my three children."

Long-term support



Obtaining the means to support oneself and to heal from the potentially traumatic experience

Potentially filing for divorce, arranging child custody matters and daycare

Finding the transition between the emergency support to long-term options and building resilience.

Assessing readiness to proceed with the criminal justice system. Coming into terms with the consequences of their experience and avoiding re-traumatization.

Financial support (benefits and how to apply for them)

Psychological support (therapy)

Specialized support for victims of forced marriage or human trafficking

The status of the marriage and possibility of divorce (legal divorce vs. religious divorce)

Potential child custody issues, issues related to resident permit (if originally obtained through family ties)

"It took me a while to be able to talk about how my husband had hurt me, but the crisis workers, and later my therapist, were very supportive. The organization helped me with housing and getting my own bank account, where the benefits were directed to. Eventually, I was able to file for divorce and apply for the custody of my children. I took language courses and when things settled down a bit I enrolled in studies to become a daycare worker."

SOLUTIONS / BEST PRACTICES

Having a support person that can accompany the victim through different procedures such as filing a police report, going to an interview.

Hands-on support in looking for a home or a job, or applying for financial support as well as for life skills like paying bills and shopping for groceries.

Empowerment



Education, getting a profession, own housing, organizing child care

Potential re-establishment of ties with family: can be positive (receiving support) or negative (continuation of coercion)

Social services
Schools/educational institutions
Employment services

Living an authentic, independent life

"Yes, so I had a lot of help. I can tell you that I would never and no matter how much courage I packed, I would never have done it alone. Never."

Quote from an interview with a survivor (Germany)

"Let them see that they are not alone, that there are people who have gone through what they are going through and that in the end you get through it."

Quote from an interview with a survivor (Spain)

SOLUTIONS / BEST PRACTICES

Avoiding re-victimization

Establishing own social support networks, being member of the local community, volunteering



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