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# Forced Marriage: Community Voices, Stories and Strategies

Consultation with community

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INITIAL REPORT PREPARED FOR THE NATIONAL ROUNDTABLE  
ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY, AUGUST 2018

## Acknowledgements

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## Disclaimer

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This report presents findings from the study commissioned by Australian Red Cross and conducted by Dr Alexandra Gartrell and Sara Shinkfield. The report intends to inform policy discussion on the Australian response to forced marriage. It draws on information, opinions and advice sourced from a variety of individuals self-identifying as being from community affected by the issue of forced marriage. While all care has been taken in preparation, the report is not intended to be exhaustive and Australian Red Cross does not accept responsibility for any omissions or errors of fact.

NOTE: To protect people's privacy, names and identifying details have been changed throughout this report.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	2
Disclaimer.....	2
Contact .....	2
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Summary of Key Findings .....</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Strategies young women use to avoid forced marriage.....	6
2. Pressure on families drives forced marriage.....	7
3. Inter-generational conflict is causing relationship breakdown .....	8
4. Create safety to seek support for the whole family.....	8
<b>Community Key Messages and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Educate and empower young people, parents and religious leaders.....	9
2. Collaboration between community and service provision sector to strengthen identification and responses .....	11
3. Engage the whole family to increase opportunities to keep families together .....	11
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Project Background.....	13
Project Purpose and Objectives .....	14
Project Methodology .....	14
<b>Sofia’s story.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>1. “Standing for myself”: Strategies young women use to avoid forced marriage .....</b>	<b>19</b>
Strategy 1: ‘Standing for myself’ .....	19
Strategy 2: Maintain a close relationship with mothers and with extended family .....	25
Strategy 3: Negotiate marriage with parents and set expectations before marriage.....	27
Strategy 4: Promote attitudinal and behavioural change in others.....	29
<b>2. “Forced marriage is a family issue”: Pressure on families is a driver of forced marriage .....</b>	<b>30</b>
1. Community pressure to maintain cultural practices.....	31
2. Community pressure on family reputation .....	34
3. Economic pressure for a better life and financial support for family in country of origin .....	37
<b>3. “The relationship is ‘out of whack’”: Inter-generational conflict between parents and children .....</b>	<b>40</b>
1. Providing choice.....	40
2. Building communication skills.....	43
<b>4. “We need to help the whole family”: Creating safety to seek services .....</b>	<b>46</b>
1. Empowerment opportunities around forced marriage in schools.....	49

2. Provide education opportunities for religious leaders around Australian marriage law and consent.....	49
3. Community empowerment classes .....	49
4. Engage families in a culturally safe and respectful way.....	50
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Methodology.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussions – Example Agendas.....</b>	<b>54</b>

## Executive Summary

*“In our community you do not live for yourself, you live for community”<sup>1</sup>*

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Since forced marriage was criminalised in 2013, significant steps have been taken by Government, civil society and communities to better identify and protect those vulnerable or subject to forced marriage in Australia. However, despite these often collaborative efforts, more effective strategies are needed which focus on prevention and early intervention. To do this, we need to better understand how Australian communities are impacted by forced marriage, how they best respond, and, most importantly, what they think can be done to prevent it at a community level. Most of all, we need to understand the experiences and advice of affected communities, what has worked, and what is needed to truly have a community-led response.

To this end, Australian Red Cross (Red Cross) has undertaken a series of consultations with community as an important step in understanding community approaches to forced marriage, and the learnings from their lived experience. In an effort to identify community-led strategies and to create a space for a stronger and more inclusive response, Red Cross opened a dialogue with eight Victorian community groups to explore and document how they understand, experience, describe, negotiate and respond to situations of forced marriage. To date, the stories, perspectives and strategies of affected communities have not been well understood by the broader sector, despite the strong work of local organisations.. Improved understanding of community responses can only better inform and enhance the design of policies and programs in this area.

Key findings and recommendations from these consultations were initially presented in the form of this report *Forced Marriage: Community Voices, Stories and Strategies* for consideration by government and civil society at the National Round Table on Human Trafficking and Slavery in August 2018. In May 2019, Red Cross launched this report publically in order to share the findings more widely with stakeholders whom may benefit from its content.

Through delivery of the Australian Government’s Support for Trafficked People Program<sup>2</sup>, and our broader engagement with authorities, civil society, communities and the sector, Red Cross has a unique insight into the impact of forced marriage in Australia. As of May 2019, Red Cross has directly assisted more than 89 people who have been impacted by forced marriage. Red Cross has also learned from daily experiences of collaborating with government, support services and community; from stakeholders, young people and communities through consultations, research and education; and from working with key sector partners to establish and jointly lead state and territory networks to improve information-sharing, referral pathways and coordination.

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<sup>1</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 24 February 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Red Cross is funded by the Department of Social Services under the National Initiatives Program to provide the Support for Trafficked People Program. For more information please visit [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au)

Red Cross' experience is that people are not helpless when facing complex social problems such as forced marriage. Across most communities there are members who are applying culturally appropriate and effective strategies to find solutions in this space. These culturally determined approaches can also support and strengthen the broader government and sector initiatives and contextualise and localise the broader response.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

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Key findings from the consultation and dialogue highlight a number of community-identified methods of addressing forced marriage.

### **1. Strategies young women use to avoid forced marriage**

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Young women have used some key strategies to avoid forced marriage within their own families, which create options and choices while keeping their families together. More women and men in affected communities need to be supported to learn these strategies and/or find strategies that work in their own families. By creating opportunities for young people and their parents to better understand inter-generational and cultural change, and build mutually respectful relationships with one another, future experiences of forced marriage may be avoided.

Four strategies young women use to avoid a forced marriage, keep families together and contribute to long-term social change were identified.

#### **Strategy 1: "Standing for myself"**

In order to stand for themselves, young people said they need to build 'self-strength' and self-trust, develop a sense of who they are and what their dreams are and be able to recognise and negotiate the multiple pressures that come from parents and family who try to pressure them to marry. They must be sure of their convictions if they are to be strong enough to resist.

#### **Strategy 2: Maintain close family relationships**

Young people emphasised that family members are key in accessing support needed. Building and maintaining strong relationships with the whole family is best done through respectful communication and negotiation. Young women named multiple communication and educational strategies that they use to negotiate space and familial support to pursue their own dreams and goals, and to enter marriage when they are ready and on terms they find agreeable.

#### **Strategy 3: Negotiate marriage and practices around it**

Young people shared strategies they use to negotiate when, if and who they marry and suggest more space could be opened to further include them in making meaningful choices about their future. Young people said they trust their parents to be involved in the process of finding a spouse, but expressed a preference for an open negotiated process where they are involved and their wishes are respected.

#### **Strategy 4: Promote social change**

Young people shared their desires to support others who may be facing a similar situation, in particular siblings, and emphasised the importance of modelling and promoting different ways of being, that carefully and respectfully challenge rigid attitudes and behaviours. They expressed wanting to be part of this change process, for their futures and for those of their children.

Finally, participants identified four things they felt a young person would need to know or understand before the above strategies could be used. They need to:

1. be aware that they have choices available to them;	2. know there are people who can help;	3. know that they can ask for help without shame or judgement; and	4. feel confident to speak out.
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## 2. Pressure on families drives forced marriage

The consultations identified a number of substantial pressures that individuals or families encounter when making decisions about marriage. In many instances, families feel they must meet certain cultural, traditional and economic standards in choosing a marriage partner, which can leave parents and young people with little space to make meaningful choices about their futures. Better understanding the enormity of these pressures could strengthen future programmatic responses. Engaging with and empowering communities to develop strategies in which they are equipped to stand up to and negotiate these pressures will ensure they are effective.

Three main pressures were identified by focus group participants.

### a. Community pressure to maintain cultural practices

Families may feel pressured by community to maintain traditional practices, whereby the wishes of young people are not acknowledged, or are dismissed.

### b. Community pressure on families to maintain 'reputation' and to marry their children to control their sexuality

Marital decisions are made in the best interests of the young person and it is believed that marriage at the right time will bring a successful future life while maintaining family reputation. Community gossip about a young person's perceived or actual behaviour, especially in relation to sexuality, further pressures families to see children 'safely' married. In doing so, however, families can coerce and limit the choices of their children. Parents want to protect their daughters and sons, and ensuring a marriage to someone within their networks of family and friends is seen to be one way to do so.

### c. Economic pressure on families for a better life and financial support for family in country of origin

Parents' wishes for their children to have a better life can lead them to pursue a marriage with someone of significant means or from a specific family. Furthermore, parents may feel pressure to keep wealth and inheritance within the family, or provide a family member access to a visa, leading them to force a marriage within the broader family network.

Young people consulted were well aware of the costs of contesting an unwanted marriage, both for themselves and for their family's honour within the community. They confided that young people who are facing multiple pressures to enter a marriage against their wishes find it very difficult to resist on their own. And if they do challenge their parents or extended families desire for them to marry; they felt certain that considerable conflict would be caused in the family.

### **3. Inter-generational conflict is causing relationship breakdown**

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All communities consulted described inter-generational differences between parents and their children, which if unaddressed, can lead to family and relationship breakdown. The values of those who grew up in countries of origin – typically parents and extended family members – and those who have or are growing up in Australia – young people and children – are increasingly distinct. Younger women who have grown up in Australia, easily named methods they use to negotiate space with their parents, or husbands if already married.

Communities identified two key areas where relationships between parents and/or their children could be strengthened, both of which needs to be understood within the broader context of inter-generational and cultural change between parents and children, countries of origin and Australia.

#### **a. Providing choice**

Consulted communities are concerned that children are being raised with different values to those within the family unit. There is a key tension between parents giving children choice and making decisions on their behalf. Parents expressed feeling torn between a fear of change and holding on to what they know, while also accepting that changes are occurring. Young people expressed a desire for their parents to trust them more, while acknowledging a need to respectfully share about the 'new' ways of living. Both parents and children need to be empowered and supported to navigate these changes.

#### **b. Building communication skills**

All participants recognised the importance of improving their communication skills to keep families and relationships strong and to be better equipped to resolve family problems and conflict. All expressed the desire to learn how to communicate more effectively.

### **4. Create safety to seek support for the whole family**

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Participants shared that when personal strategies to avoid a forced marriage through negotiation with their families and extended families are not working, they turn to sources of outside help – to teachers, counsellors and other professionals, including the police as a last resort. They explained how important it is for those seeking support outside the family to be offered options that are safe, appropriate and effective. Equally important, they shared, is creating a process that supports families to come back together.

Communities described how parents can be simultaneously engaged with to ensure strategies are in place to address the underlying factors that may result in a forced marriage. They also suggested that engaging with families in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner that is

both discrete and confidential, can reduce feelings of shame and open space for honest dialogue. In this way, the whole family can be supported with tools to reduce conflict and find resolution. This type of practice, if shared and supported, could be a key factor in young people choosing to speak out against a marriage before it happens.

## **Community Key Messages and Recommendations**

Communities consulted agreed on three key messages they felt would begin positively addressing forced marriage issues in their communities.

1. Forced marriage does not exist in a vacuum and prevention and empowerment opportunities should engage the whole community.
2. There is a need to engage with, learn from and involve communities in finding solutions. Collaborating around and building on community strengths, community led responses and prevention strategies will result in earlier identification and more appropriate and effective responses.
3. For responses to be effective, the whole family should be supported and provided with appropriate and safe ways of staying together.

Together these three messages promote appropriate solutions that support individuals to have options and choice, while keeping family relations intact, and if this is not possible, to have access to the support services they need.

The following are the community-determined recommendations that emerged through this consultation.

### **1. Educate and empower young people, parents and religious leaders**

#### **FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

- a. **Empowerment classes for young girls and boys, women and men designed by community, for community.**

These courses could be run by specially trained community liaison leads who co-design these programs in consultation with young people and other local specialist agencies.

Classes would build confidence, awareness of self, personal goals, negotiation and communication skills and strategies that are respectful and promote understanding of parents. Young people would be empowered to respectfully negotiate greater personal autonomy while maintaining close relationships with their parents, extended family and community. This requires the development of sensitivity, insight, assertiveness and good communication skills.

This approach has been trialled by Red Cross through the Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building Project, and the people involved found it to be effective.

- b. **Bring young people together in peer-groups to discover options, to support and learn from one another and learn about available supports.**

Peers are most often the first form of support for young people, and bringing them together to share, discuss and learn is critical. One particularly useful tool used by Red

Cross through the Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building Project is to add a formal structure of active learning such as developing role plays based upon their experiences and enact these as dramatic skits where audience members have to identify signs of coercion, community pressure, intervention points and ways of changing family and community dialogue around forced marriage. This approach could also be used with women/girls and men/boys only groups, or in groups of parents.

## FOR PARENTS

- a. Empower parents to feel confident to be able to give their children space and to negotiate healthy boundaries and trust.

Parenting programs could be run through high schools and offer separate sessions for young people and for parents, as well as sessions for parents together with their children. Specific sessions on this issue could be incorporated into current parenting support provide by community organisations. Topics for parenting classes could include Australian marriage law, rights of the child, women's rights and consequences of forced marriage for young people and their families.

## FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

- a. Religious leaders to empower fellow religious leaders to address issues of forced marriage within their communities, through train-the-trainer methodology.

This training should build understanding of consent, and the contexts in which a young person who is due to marry may feel comfortable enough in to be able to say no.

The training methodology should be co-designed by religious leaders and community liaisons or another cultural expert with training in the area of forced marriage.

Religious leaders can play an active and educative role in supporting:

- communication between parties prior to marriage;
- women to articulate conditions of the marriage prior to marrying, while they hold power to negotiate;
- an 'engagement' period prior to marriage;
- newly-weds on women's rights, rights of the child and marital law;
- information sharing about consent during marriage ceremonies and public talks.

- b. Develop targeted community education programs for lay religious leaders and community elders.

These programs could be run by community liaisons together with trained religious leaders and include information on Australian marriage laws and responsibilities under such laws.

- c. Use religious teachings to co-develop awareness raising messages with community liaison officers and community members that separate religious beliefs from cultural practices.

## 2. Collaboration between community and service provision sector to strengthen identification and responses

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### a. Reach out and share response information with services where “people need to go”.

This includes places such as at maternal and child health care centres, child care centres, playgroups, neighbourhood houses, TAFE, English language schools and Centrelink.

This could involve service providers and community members and groups working together to learn how to provide culturally sensitive responses.

Community liaisons can play a central role in:

- working with service providers to incorporate information and community-facilitated sessions on parenting, healthy families, communication and assertiveness within pre-existing health and social inclusion programs;
- engaging with Centrelink to identify socially isolated women;
- sharing signs that someone could be experiencing a forced marriage with teachers and service providers to help them identify people who need support earlier.

### b. Work together with local services to empower women to be confident, assertive and honest communicators.

This could be done by bringing women and girls together in safe community spaces to share their voices and to get stronger. These community sessions need to be held in a safe and welcoming space, in particular to encourage socially isolated women and girls to participate. In these groups, women can teach other women and girls about their choices; they can raise awareness about the available sources of support; and by building understanding of the community pressures individuals and families are facing, they can work together to support families to address these pressures in a safe way.

### d. Develop guidelines on “being successful in Australia” that incorporates information on Australian laws and about educating young people.

This could be shared with all new arrivals to Australia and in citizenship classes, and a specialist session on forced marriage needs to be included.

Use different media to share this information, such as videos on forced marriage tailored to different audiences that can be available on *YouTube*, for example a cartoon format for children.

## 3. Engage the whole family to increase opportunities to keep families together

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### a. Support teams of cultural insiders/community liaisons to engage with and respond to the whole family.

To work in this manner community liaisons need to be affiliated with reputable organisations and have the authority to act in that capacity.

Community liaisons need to be fully trained in forced marriage legislation, have a comprehensive knowledge of the religious and cultural issues associated with forced marriage and trained in conflict resolution techniques.

Community liaisons should first talk to the young person needing support, and then with their permission, speak with their family. When speaking with family, “send two people, not one, as it's a sensitive topic and the more back up the community liaison has the more seriously people will take it”. Going in pairs also helps give confidence to the community liaison and ensures personal safety and protection. Their authority is likely to be challenged and they must be trained to be prepared and able to hand this.

When approaching families, confidentiality is important, as “people fear that the community liaison will tell the authorities and their picture may be documented”.

Information should be provided to families, in preferred language.

**b. Service providers and government agencies should approach families with respect.**

If authorities are going to visit a family, they should warn the family and make the visit as discrete as possible. Police and child protection agencies should coordinate with community liaisons to reduce some of the fear families feel in these situations.

Community liaisons can help service providers to engage with and resolve problems within families, so both parents and young people are empowered (not shamed) and feel like they have choices. They can also work with families to find ways to resolve conflict so children can remain at home.

# Introduction

## Project Background

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The *Forced Marriage: Community Voices, Stories and Strategies* project was initiated by Red Cross to learn from communities identifying as affected by forced marriage.

The Victorian branch of Red Cross has worked with community to provide community education on forced marriage since 2014. Through the Forced Marriage Community Education Project, Red Cross developed resources to assist culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and the organisations that support them better understand the Australian laws around marriage, and the resources and supports available to people dealing with forced marriage.

In 2017, this work was expanded through a three and a half year Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building (VFMCB) project, funded by the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division. The VFMCB project builds upon and strengthens the community education project by adoption of a community empowerment approach that aims to uncover community identified solutions and strengthen them. Sector coordination and capacity building is also a key objective. Red Cross works alongside CALD communities in the VFMCB project to identify and develop ways to more effectively prevent and respond to forced marriage. The project works collaboratively with key community liaisons within these communities, each of whom have self-identified as being part of a community that is affected by this issue. These community liaisons facilitated Red Cross access to the men and women who participated in this current project and whose voices are shared in this report.

Through the Support for Trafficked People Program and the Victorian community empowerment project, Red Cross is privy to how the pressures around forced marriage are tearing families and communities apart. Families are further fractured when children leave home to avoid a forced marriage, despite often returning. There is currently a disconnect between the formal responses to forced marriage, which involve authorities and police responding when families are at crisis point, and the work being done at the community level to prevent forced marriage and protect young people and adults.

Furthermore, there is a shortage of documented experiences of those affected by forced marriage. This includes a telling of personal stories and experiences, identification and descriptions of community-led solutions, accounts and views of forced marriage, along with views on the current responses to the issue and what opportunities there are to strengthen protections and supports for individuals and families affected by forced marriage.

The consultations that form the basis of this report provided an opportunity to bridge this gap and learn from communities identifying as affected by forced marriage. Current responses to forced marriage can be strengthened by drawing more deeply on community expertise and that of cultural insiders, while simultaneously re-framing the conversation within broader society and adopting a more unified and empowering approach to forced marriage.

## Project Purpose and Objectives

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The purpose of this community consultation was to document the stories, views and recommendations of communities in response to forced marriage – in their own voices – in relation to the current and future response to forced marriage.

The project had three primary objectives:

1. to empower communities to shape key messages to influence policies and programs on forced marriage;
2. to capture and record the stories and views of affected communities on their experiences of forced marriage;
3. to identify and record the ways communities are currently preventing and responding to forced marriage; and

## Project Methodology

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This project adopted a qualitative, participatory and asset-based approach. These principles aimed to ensure that the consultation process itself empowered participants by building a space of trust and respect where their voices would be heard and valued. The asset-based approach inspired questions that uncovered community led solutions, an intentional reframe from a more traditional, problem-solving model.

A series of eight focus group discussions (FGD) were held with a total of 89 people (30 men and 59 women) mainly from four affected communities – Afghan, Pakistani, Rohingya and Tamil speakers from Sri Lanka and southern India. Some insight was also gained into Sierra Leonean, Bengali and Hindi experiences through three of the community liaisons.<sup>3</sup>

Project participants were recruited through the community liaison's social and professional networks. Information about the project was shared with potential participants who were then invited to take part in a focus group discussion (*see Appendix 1 for more information on project methodology*). Alongside building trust, appropriate questions were critical to the consultation process and trailing with the community liaisons led to the refinement of questions and structure of the focus group discussions in an iterative process across the seven focus groups (*see Appendix 2*).

Focus group discussions opened with questions that examined community strengths and protective factors that make relationships strong, healthy and respectful. Identification of these factors in relationships between husband and wife, parents and their children, siblings, with extended family and in-laws, and with community, enabled discussion to then turn to the identification of factors that lead to relationship breakdown. Participants were then asked about the factors that may contribute to a family forcing a marriage. Finally, a scenario of a 16 year old girl being forced to marry was presented and participants were asked to consider what might be

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<sup>3</sup> Community Liaisons working with ARC's Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building Project (2017- 2019).

happening in her family, identify family and community expectations and suggest ideas on what a young person like this may need to feel supported and respected (*see Appendix 2*). This approach identified family, extended family and community pressures that young people experience, as well as appropriate family and community strategies to address forced marriage. This use of a scenario gave participants an opportunity to respond to a real world example in a safe space and without having to disclose their own personal experiences. Verbal and written consent was gained from all participants.

**Table 1: Participants in focus group discussion by gender and cultural background**

Focus Group Discussion – Cultural group	Focus group date		Number of participants	female participants	Number of participants	male
Community liaisons	13	January 2018	11	4		
Pakistani men and women	21	January 2018	7	4		
Young Afghan women	25	January 2018	12	-		
Older Afghan women	01	February 2018	11	-		
Afghan religious leaders	06	February 2018	0	6		
Afghan women with small children	07	February 2018	12	-		
Tamil women with small children from Sri Lanka and Southern India	07	February 2018	6	-		
Rohingya men	10	February 2018	0	16		
Validation Workshop	24	February 2018	8	1		
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>67</b>	<b>31</b>		

## Limitations

This project has a number of limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

Forced marriage is an issue that affects boys and girls and men and women in many different communities. However the consultations largely focused on the experiences of young women in the communities who participated.

The consultation process was limited by the breadth of community representation. Three of the eight focus groups were with Afghan women, partly because they readily engaged with forced marriage issues and were keen to be involved. Although smaller numbers of Afghan men, Pakistani men and women, Tamil speakers from Sri Lanka and Southern India, and Rohingya men participated in focus group discussions, additional consultation is required, particularly given the complexity of the issues and the diversity within each community and in the family living situations of young boys and girls. Furthermore, only one consultation with religious leaders was held.

Given the paucity of information on forced marriage, particularly with communities at risk, findings are nonetheless significant.

## Sofia's story

Sofia is a twenty three year old Afghan Australian woman who successfully avoided the forced marriage her parents were arranging for her when she was sixteen years old.

Sofia's story highlights the immense familial and community pressure young people experience when their parents arrange marriages against their wishes. Sofia adopted her own strategy to negotiate a way out while maintaining her relationship with her mother and father. She found a middle way – a place where her and her parents' wishes could both be met. She had used this strategy before and knew that it worked. Nonetheless, it required what Sofia refers to as "self-strength"<sup>4</sup> and time to allow parental anger and hurt at a child's defiance to settle into acceptance and love. As Sofia herself recognises, this path is uncomfortable, long and hard; but to take no action and to go ahead with a marriage against one's wishes, carries an even higher cost that extends across a person's entire life:

*"In my fight for freedom, I wanted to give up so many times and just accept the guy but when I imagined... I'll be honest with you, when I imagined sleeping with that guy, I just couldn't do it. How am I going to do it... you have to be realistic ... I would rather upset my parents for a few years than spend the rest of my life being in that situation... my parents might be angry and might hate me now but eventually they will forgive me, because I am their child... now they are very happy and very supportive. ... I decided to join the police force and my mum is the first support person.*

*It was a very hard long process... I failed year 12 because of the pressure and depression but I didn't give up on high school... I didn't give up and went back to school and tried my best and did it with the support and help of my teachers. ... It is a very long process but you will become wiser, braver, stronger and more understanding toward other people and toward any other situation and you know how to handle it if it comes again."*

Avoiding forced marriage was not the first time Sofia had challenged her parents' wishes and found a solution to the issue at hand that suited her and her parents. Sofia described how she negotiated the practice of daily prayers that her mother forced her to do and which she had stopped for some time. By questioning her own values and beliefs, and learning the value of daily prayer through her own experience, she returned to the practice:

*"Talking from personal experience, I used to get forced to wear the head scarf and pray every single morning... Mum used to get up and wake me up to pray and I absolutely hated it. I didn't want to pray and I didn't want to wear the head scarf because I was forced to... it was not something that I wanted to do. As I was growing older, I actually stopped praying for a while, and I was a mess mentally... but then I started praying again, and I actually saw... I felt good, I felt peaceful, I got a lot of answers from praying and I started... I always had my hijab on and I am used to it, I feel comfortable in it, I always have it on. ... and I have started praying and now I have questioned my religion and I have questioned my beliefs and I have found a lot of answers... and these days I get up before my Mum for morning prayer. She used to force me and I used to hate it, and get out of it, and not pray, and not listen to her. But now I get up before*

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<sup>4</sup> Sofia used the term 'self-strength' to refer to her inner sense of empowerment and strength to take action and follow her convictions. It is used throughout this document to capture this meaning.

*her and I am praying before she is... I realise the value of it now... I actually questioned it myself... why am I doing these things, what is the reasons for doing it... what is the value of it."*  
FGD, 25 January 2018

Sofia recognises that going against her parents' wishes upsets them, but with time they will accept her decision because they love her and want to see her happy. She described the strategy she adopted to create space to shape her own life while maintaining a respectful and loving relationship with her parents:

*"One strategy is.... If you really want something and if you have the passion for it, then go for it even if your parents disagree with it. You go for it and your parents might be upset for a few years, but if you can prove them wrong and work hard for it... they will eventually forgive you and love you for it and they will have more respect for you... if you prove them wrong and actually work hard for it... you stick to your goals... they are your parents, they will forgive you and they only want to see you happy.*

*Ninety percent of the time this strategy will work whether it is an arranged marriage or forced marriage or whether personal goals or career... it will work for everything so long as you have the passion for it... at the end of the day parents want to see you, their child, happy and successful."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Sofia had the insight to realise that her parents valued her happiness, and it was for this reason they tried to force her to marry, to pray each day and to wear a head scarf. Her parents believed that following this path – and the cultural traditions that they were raised with – was the best way to bring Sofia happiness and success in life.

*"When your parents force you to do something, it is because that is what they think is the best thing for you. Whether it is arranged marriage, or education, or whatever, they think it is the best decision they are making... because of their limited amount of knowledge... they think that they are making the best decision for you."*

FGD 25 January 2018

Sofia found a third way – a middle path – to respectfully show her parents that when she has input into the decisions that shape her life and when her dreams and passions are able to exist alongside her parents' wishes for her happiness, they can all be happy. Sofia found this pathway through the support of her extended family:

*"My parents were arranging for me as well and I couldn't talk to them, so I went to my uncle because I knew that my Mum was going to listen to her brother ...and my uncle sat down and talked to my parents and this helped. I was 16 and the good thing is they would not dare to do this again ever. I am a very stubborn person and I stand up for myself."*

FGD 25 January 2018

She reflects that although people hesitate to talk about sensitive matters because it is uncomfortable, opening dialogue is the first step to address forced marriage and any other issues where parents and children's wishes are in conflict:

*"I think a lot of the time people hesitate [to talk]... they might feel uncomfortable about certain things [like forced marriage] that they don't want to share but I think.... facing and overcoming those uncomfortable feelings and actually talking about it is the first step..."*

FGD 25 January 2018

When asked how she got the courage to stand up to her parents Sofia explained:

*“It is more about self-strength...nothing can help you and nothing will help you unless you put yourself there, and you start and you make the move yourself. Trust me, no one is going to pick you up and rescue you...the only person who can help you is yourself, who can motivate you and empower you is yourself.”*

Teachers, counsellors and psychologists also supported Sofia over several years and taught her many life skills that gave her the tools to find her way through:

*“Once a teacher told me to set a goal for myself and she said 80 percent is setting the goal... and 20 percent is the work... you have to see yourself there... She [woman at risk] needs a lot of encouragement from her surroundings... her teachers.... social workers... psychologist, GP... It is important that they are not in the community [to avoid gossip]... she should not be afraid of her problems.... she shouldn't be ashamed of it... it is not her fault...”*

Sofia would like to be able to share her experience with other young people and to encourage them to be able to help themselves. To do this Sofia feels they would need to put themselves first:

*“She [woman at risk] needs to put herself first, to love and respect herself first... before anyone else, including her parents, she needs to put herself first and recognise her own values, morals and decisions, she needs to realise what she wants to have in life.*

*I would tell [others at risk of forced marriage] to follow your heart in your decision and don't follow anything else because this is what I did and I got through... just putting yourself in the situation, planning it out, imagining yourself, how are you going to do and if there is no way out and there is no way you can do it, you have to fight for you freedom because it is your life.”*

Reflecting on the cost of not doing so, Sophia shared:

*“I know people who have been forced to marry – they regret not fighting for themselves at the start, they regret not standing up for themselves while they are married, but it is too late because they already have kids... there is no point... they live in hell but because of community expectations and their reputation, they will stay and try to keep things together... I think it is better to fight it off from the start rather than to regret it.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Sofia had this 'self-strength', clarity of her own values and desires, and the courage to reach out for help from her extended family, teachers and counsellors at her school, to her general practitioner and a psychologist. She had already trialled her own strategy of standing her ground with her parents, and knew that it worked. She knew it would be difficult, but would not destroy her or her relationship with her family.

## 1. “Standing for myself”: Strategies young women use to avoid forced marriage

Sofia’s story illustrates the importance of a key community message: empower women to develop and articulate personal values, beliefs and wishes, and to stand strongly in their convictions. Focus group discussions revealed four strategies young people use to negotiate and avoid a forced marriage, and to contribute to broader social change as a long-term strategy. Participants felt it is particularly important for young people at risk to be aware that they have choices available to them, and that this awareness is a critical first step.

As Sofia’s story further demonstrates, ‘self-strength’ is critical and participants recognised that for young girls to resist the multiple pressures they face when parents arrange a marriage against their wishes, they must be strong enough to stand in their own convictions in the face of resistance. They must simultaneously build understanding with parents, and teach parents how to best support them to achieve their goals, including marriage and living a successful life. This means that:

*“Women must be focused and know what they want ...”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

If a woman’s strategy fails, she needs to know where she can access support outside her family and community. Women’s awareness of, and courage to seek available support at school, with social services, general practitioners and the police, is vital.

### Strategy 1: ‘Standing for myself’

Women identified many available sources of support that could be drawn upon when young people are at risk of a forced marriage (*refer Table 2 below*). First and foremost however, they must be able to ‘stand for themselves’<sup>5</sup> and reach out to members of their immediate and extended families, to friends and peers, community elders and religious leaders, school teachers, services and if needed, to the police for help.

#### ‘Standing for myself’

*“I was the only one wearing a hijab at my school and was bullied for this. I asked to go up in school assembly and make a speech about why I wear a scarf. I asked my English as a Second Language teacher to help me and she supported me... After I gave the talk no one bullied me anymore. Individuals can bring change. Today if we can share this message with one or two people then this is a success.”* Muslima, FGD, 25 January 2018

<sup>5</sup> This was the term women used to describe ‘self-help’.

Some young women like Sofia and Muslima are already ‘standing for themselves’ and taking assertive action to address challenges that they encounter in their daily lives – such as the bullying that Muslima experienced for wearing a hijab. Other women explained how they challenge their brothers to help with domestic work and question people behaving in inappropriate ways toward women in shopping centres and other public places. Over time, these actions build women’s ‘self-strength’, their self-esteem and confidence to ‘stand for themselves’ when they need to, and by doing so, they will be more likely to be empowered to say no to forced marriage. These actions bring greater societal awareness and as Muslima notes, are small steps toward social changes that give women greater options.

Table 2 illustrates the many potential sources of support available for girls and young women at risk, ranging from members of her immediate family – particularly her mother, extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents), best friends and peers, family friends (particularly her father’s friends), community elders, religious leaders and cultural ‘insiders’. School teachers, support and other professional services as well as the police are also potential sources of support.

**Table 2: Sources of support for women at risk, or in forced marriages<sup>6</sup>**

Support Source	Examples
<i>Girl at risk herself</i>	<p><i>“Educate yourself first – as a human, as a Muslim, as an Afghan. Once you know your rights no one can take them away from you.”</i></p> <p><i>“She must explore all her options – talking with strangers, family, friends, Imam – to get support and help.”</i></p>
<i>Immediate family</i>	
Mother/parents	<p><i>“Marriage – just talk to me [the mother]... they will clash with their dad... they [men] take it a little bit harder... hard for them to digest...”</i></p> <p><i>“You should go to mum and dad and say they cannot do that [forced marriage] and that you will tell the police. It will cause more problems if you report it [to the police]... it is better to warn your parents.”</i></p>
Siblings	<i>“She could go to her older siblings or to her father’s mother.”</i>
<i>Extended family</i>	
Aunts and uncles	<i>“Talk with aunties and then the aunt can talk to the mother, she can influence the husband to bring a change... often the aunty is more open to the niece”</i>

<sup>6</sup> All quotes in Table 2 are from Focus Group Discussions.

Support Source	Examples
	<i>"My Uncle actually mediated between my husband and I and we are still together."</i>
Grandparents	<i>"She could go to her paternal grandmother – her father's mother."</i>
Cousins	<i>"Cousins might help her because they are also from the younger generation and have a different point of view to parents."</i>  <i>"There is more chance a cousin will step up and help because they are young. They can step up and look at school, talk to family members, look for help."</i>  <i>"[Young girls] don't want to talk to cousins or friends because they will be blamed by parents."</i>
Other extended family members	<i>"My sister-in-law was a reliable friend to me... we had an intimate relationship and I wanted her to come and help reconcile my marital situation."</i>
<b>Community support</b>	
Religious leaders/community elders	<i>"Approach an Imam. If he is an educated Imam... he will get involved and stop them. These days the Imams who are trusted and know about these issues can act as a mediator or take on educational role with the families. The families will listen to the Imam."</i>
Peers/close friends of woman at risk	<i>"I almost gave up, but my school mates gave me options."</i>  <i>"Share with a trusted friend."</i>  <i>"A good friend is an effective source of help... they continue to provide over the long term, ongoing subtle support... [they are] reliable."</i>  <i>"May be too scared to tell an aunt, but will tell their peers."</i>  <i>"Peers are not always helpful all the time. There can be barriers. If a peer steps into an issue, they will be told it's a family issue."</i>
Friends of family/ father	<i>"Someone who is part of their social network can be a more influential and effective negotiator with the husband and his network/relatives."</i>
Community/cultural insider	<i>"Someone from her community needs to help her. Someone who knows the culture, the laws, the community and is from the same background... a cultural insider who has complete cultural knowledge and knows how to be respectful and to put forward an opinion in an appropriate manner. It could be a friend or relative."</i>
<b>Professional support</b>	

Support Source	Examples
Teachers	<p><i>“Communicate with friends at school and teachers.”</i></p> <p><i>“My teacher at school helped. She gave me a scholarship so I had a path... otherwise I would have gone back.”</i></p> <p><i>“Parents are generally scared of schools because they know they will report to police. Parents won’t have power against the school counsellor.”</i></p>
General practitioners (GPs)	<p><i>GPs were only mentioned once as a source of support.</i></p>
Counsellors / psychologists	<p><i>“School counsellor as a point for the girl to go to. She can ask to talk to the counsellor... If the girl reaches out then she will gain confidence. The girl will know it is confidential.”</i></p> <p><i>“Build the girl’s confidence through counselling.”</i></p> <p><i>“Raised that maybe the mother might not allow her to go to the counsellor if she knows about it.”</i></p>
<b>Other</b>	
People outside of cultural community	<p><i>“When someone comes to us [for support], we need to be strong enough. There is always a way in Australia.”</i></p> <p><i>“Anyone can speak with the family if they have the knowledge and the right approach. I asked them how much of your life are your kids? 100%, 80%, most answer. So, we discuss how important it is that they have a good future and relationship.”</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes it’s good to talk to strangers... complete strangers... who will not know you or your family... If you speak with someone from community, it comes back to you. Sometimes stranger gives good advice... open advice. Objective. Anonymous.”</i></p>
Police	<p><i>“I would call the police – I don’t care about the communities’ reaction.... I’m saving a child’s life... if I did go to the police, the community would gossip, they would say ‘Why are you sticking your nose in other people’s business?’”</i></p> <p><i>“If you go to the Police, it will cause more problems... everyone loses safety... confidentiality – as all the neighbours and everyone knows what is going on.”</i></p> <p><i>“Who are they to tell me what to do’ is a common response of parents (fathers) when police, teachers and social works and other outsiders get involved.”</i></p> <p><i>“Girls feel they either have to go with the forced marriage or go to the police.”</i></p>

Support Source	Examples
	<p><i>“Police have no awareness of the family... society thinks that they are helping but this ‘help’ is not helpful. There is a breakdown in communication that needs to be repaired and the police do not assist.”</i></p> <p><i>“After you go to the police, it causes conflict.”</i></p> <p><i>“[Police] have to complete tasks... they are the last option.”</i></p>

For young girls to be able to reach out and utilise these supports, focus group participants identified three critical factors. Young women must:

**a. Be strong and aware that they have a choice**

Community representatives felt that new arrivals to Australia are the most likely to be unaware that they have a choice in marriage. Awareness raising needs to target this group, among others. Focus group participants strongly expressed that the girl at risk herself needs to explore all her options and do whatever it takes to get help. This requires determination, awareness of her rights and available options. As an older woman explained:

*“Only one person can stand up for one’s own rights. The person needs to step up and take ownership of their rights. We think women don’t have rights but women have been given equal rights. We need to own these rights... if she is a strong girl she will survive.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

For girls and young women who have not yet found this strength, this can be more difficult. Communities consulted recommend that young people be brought together in groups to share stories such as Sofia’s. This would allow them to learn from one another, grow their ‘self-strength’, and the negotiation and communication skills required to find their own solutions – their own middle path that suits their families’ situation and the challenges they encounter.

**b. Know that there are people who can help and that she can ask without shame**

When young girls decided to seek help for a problem, they first went to someone within their social network or at school, before seeking external assistance from services (*refer Table 2*). For example, Sofia went to her uncle and then approached her teachers and other service providers for support. The young women in focus groups explained how they chose the person most appropriate to help them in their exact circumstances. Young women are strategic and pragmatic decision-makers. They take into account the power dynamics and relationships between family members, and approach the person most likely to be able to bring about change in their parents:

*“If your mum doesn’t help you, go to your aunty. This will help you in a hard situation.”*

*Q<sup>7</sup>: Who in the family will help most?*

*Depends on the situation – if mum won't let me wear something, I go to my aunty. If mum won't let me go a certain place, I go to my uncle."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

**c. Be confident to speak out knowing that it is not her fault**

While some women who participated in the focus group discussions – like Sofia and Muslima – were vocal, assertive and articulate, others were more reserved. Women felt that coming together in groups is critical, in order to show other women that they have options, that support is available and that they can take action and 'stand for themselves' in their own lives:

*"When women and girls come together in groups to share their voices, they get stronger."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Current responses to forced marriage focus on interventions with support services that can respond to women when they are at imminent risk or present in crisis. Preventative family-focused strategies are required, and could engage with culturally specific community organisations who have access to these multiple social and community supports that girls and women approach for help, prior to seeking assistance from formal services (this is explored further in section 4 below<sup>8</sup>).

**Support young people to seek help by increased awareness, 'self-strength' and 'standing for themselves'**

*"They must know that it is ok to say no to marriage."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"It is important for young people to know it's not hopeless and not all is lost... She told me she was trying to attempt suicide because of physical and emotional abuse... She thought I will disclose because I am in a country where there is help."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

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<sup>7</sup> Question from focus group facilitator.

<sup>8</sup> Section 4: "We need to help the whole family": Creating safety to seek services.

## Strategy 2: Maintain a close relationship with mothers and with extended family

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Building and maintaining strong and respectful relationships between family members and extended family is the second strategy identified by communities. The importance and power of this is highlighted in the dialogue below.

### Build strong and respectful families through respectful communication

*“Four years ago, a girl came to me (community worker) several months before she was to go to school. This girl and her family had recently arrived in Australia and the family was under pressure to marry the girl to someone from their family. Her mother was married at 13 years of age, and did not think it was a problem for her daughter to get married at 16 years of age. The girl was upset and crying and didn’t know what to do. She wanted to make her mother happy, but she wanted to study. The community worker who the girl went to see for help asked her:*

*‘How is your mother?’*

*‘My mother listens to everyone, but not to herself... she has no voice or power.’*

*‘Do you want to be like your mother?’*

*‘No.’*

*‘Ok, follow me then... When you go home, what do you do?’*

*‘I eat food from my mother and then I go back to my room.’*

*I told her: ‘Ok, change this. When you go home, thank your mother for your food. Talk to your mother. Talk about her day. Build a relationship with her. Tell her about your dreams. When you somewhere, always ask for her permission. Always stick to the time frame that you tell her. Tell her that you love her....What about your father?’*

*‘My father gets up at 7am.’*

*‘Ok, get up too and give him a hug. Tell him that you love him. Tell him your dream is to be a lawyer...’*

*This was four years ago that this happened. She is now doing her tests to become a lawyer.*

*If I teach her this, she can be a role model for her younger siblings and there will be less violence in the family. I was trying to build a happy family. Good communication is important. The father had not had many opportunities and the mother had not had her own dreams to follow. So, the children need to educate their parents about what is available here [in Australia] and the opportunities... The mother could live through her daughter and achieve what she could not do.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

Mothers are a key source of support and role models for their daughters. Participants in focus group discussions noted that mothers are particularly responsible for teaching children about culture and religion. Children also learn about relationships between husband and wife, parents and children through their parents' relationships. For this reason, mothers are uniquely positioned to demonstrate how girls and young women can speak up and assert themselves.

*"[It] comes back to mother... the mother should stand up to the father... the father is always pushing."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"Mothers are key role models of speaking out."*

FGD, 21 January 2018

Young women were more likely to approach their mother before their father, to talk about problems or a forced marriage. Women felt that it is best to speak with their parents separately and to start with the parent who will be more receptive and able to listen to you best. If this is the mother, they felt it was then important to prepare for this conversation; clean the house ahead of time, make sure she is in a good mood, sit with her, make her a cup of tea and speak to her respectfully. For example:

*"The mother is nearly always in the kitchen – so great advice is to get her [the daughter] to help [her mother] in the kitchen and with the housework [and then talk to her]."*

FGD, 13 January 2018

Daughters felt that when mothers were relaxed, they were more receptive to their daughter's point of view and this allowed them to explain things to her. Young women in the group discussions were aware that how you deliver your message is just as important as the message. They found that using phrases such as *"do you know what I learnt today?"* to be particularly helpful in this regard. Young women were aware that they needed to play an educative role with their mothers, and also their fathers, and that this needs to be done in a respectful and well-reasoned manner. The dialogue on the previous page provides an example of a strategy a community worker suggested to a young girl at risk of forced marriage, in order to promote communication and understanding between parents and children. This strategy highlights the importance of building close, respectful and open relationships with family when it comes to negotiating one's way out of a forced marriage. The young girl who adopted this strategy is no longer at risk of forced marriage.

Mothers also recognised that they needed to be role models of 'self-strength' for their daughters and be proactive in putting family over community expectations. For example:

*"Mothers need to educate their daughters. If we have a strong woman in the family or community then they can educate women, men, sons and daughters."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"Educate mothers. It doesn't matter what the community think, you need to think about your family."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Women shared that when the mother and children are empowered, the father has less power:

*“Mothers have a close connection with their daughters – if the daughter knows she has her mother’s trust and support, this limits the power of the husband.”*

FGD, 22 February 2018

Mothers are also in a position to influence their husbands and to mediate between husband and daughter when there is conflict, such as in situations of forced marriage. Building women’s confidence and awareness of the important role they play, and strengthening their communication skills would be helpful in such situations.

The responsibility for good communication and close familial relationships rests with both parents, extended family and with young girls. The dialogue documented on page 29 suggests an appropriate communication strategy for young people to use to engage both parents individually in a discussion of forced marriage. Parenting groups that build these specific skills and knowledge could be a helpful strategy to achieve this outcome. The goal of such communication is:

*“To breakdown the hierarchy between parents and children and to build open communication and trust where no topic of conversation is off limits.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

Furthermore, young women reported that having good relationships with members of their extended family is helpful in their lives more broadly. Similar to Sophia’s strategy to get her uncle involved, when young girls have a good relationship with grandparents, aunts or uncles, they can go to them for help when and if they need support. Participants felt the value of building and maintaining strong relationships with extended family could be shared in peer groups, empowerment sessions and through curriculum at schools.

### **Strategy 3: Negotiate marriage with parents and set expectations before marriage**

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Negotiation and collaboration around the marriage decision was the third strategy communities suggested in seeking to delay or avoid forced marriages.

Participants agreed that an open negotiated process between parents and their daughters is preferable to parents/fathers deciding on a young woman’s marriage without her consent. Participants pointed out that it is not that women do not want their parents to be engaged in organising marriages for them, but they want to be involved and for their wishes to be part of the process.

Amena’s story below demonstrates that her father’s involvement was not a problem for her, but she wanted to take her time to get to know her potential husband and to make her own decision. Amena is now happily married. A negotiated process such as this, between parents and the young person, gives space for decisions to be made that suit all parties.

## Young girls negotiate time to get to know potential spouses

Amena was asked by her father if she wanted to get married. She didn't want to say no and took time to think about it. After six months she started speaking with the man, and after three years of getting to know him, she then agreed to marriage. Amena always said what she expected and was open about expectations. She always shared stories of what happens in community and the risks of bad matches. She shared stories of family violence and divorce and said to her father to make sure these things do not happen to your daughters.

*"My dad accepted my 'no' because I kept pointing out the cost of divorce... the consequences... I told him stories to educate him."*

Amena, FGD, 1 February 2018

Other young women also took time to get to know their potential husband prior to marriage to decide if they were suited. While they got to know each other, young girls like Amena clearly articulated their expectations, ground rules and their daily habits with their potential husbands:

*"Prior to marrying I spent three years getting to know him and over this time I shared with him who I am, and what I like to do and expect."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*"It is important to talk to each other first before you get married."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Women felt the most important thing is to start from a point of negotiation. They would like their parents to be more open to them finding someone they like, and then parents get involved.

*"Negotiation process between the parents and the child is key to a solution... if you do not want this man, who do you want...we [parents] can check out the family."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

One mother in a group discussion described how her daughter met her now fiancé herself and with her mother's help and support, arranged an introduction to her father. The couple had a religious ceremony to confirm their 'marriage' and from a cultural perspective can now spend time together as a couple before getting legally married. This approach has enabled cultural considerations and community expectations to be met, while also giving this young woman a voice and choice in her own marriage.

A negotiated marriage process enables women to set expectations with their prospective husbands prior to marriage. Women who had done so noted that their husbands help them with domestic tasks. However these women and their husbands were the exceptions.

*"When I was growing up, from the beginning of my relationship, I set this expectation. I never made lunch for my husband. He makes it himself. I did not do the things he can do himself. At the beginning, there was struggle but initially he had to do. [I] stood my ground and then this set up a routine."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"Before you start you have to be more honest to your partner. Tell them who you are. Share. Say everything. Be honest and say things that they may not expect."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

These stories show that starting relationships with open, honest communication provides a good foundation for their future, irrespective of cultural norms.

#### Strategy 4: Promote attitudinal and behavioural change in others

The fourth strategy focus group discussion participants identified to help themselves and others delay or avoid forced marriages was that of being part of broader attitudinal and behavioural change. Women are aware of the need for attitudinal and behavioural change in themselves and in men, and that this is the foundation for more autonomy. To bring about these changes, some women actively challenge the behaviour of their brothers and of other women. For example:

*“My brother offers to make tea... the response from this person is shock. Ladies in the house do everything. Two brothers do things like this in private, but not when guests are around. Reason they do these things (offer tea, etc.) is that that they are told to do it by their sister... if a male sibling sitting in the house and bossing around sister based on model of mother / father relationship... we should step up and say that this is wrong... role model something for the people around us.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Women described the importance of bringing about long-term change, even if only small changes occur: *“we cannot give up on a whole generation”*.<sup>9</sup> To achieve these broader social changes, the consulted communities suggested four strategies to engage families and communities. These are set out in section 4 below.

Finally, many participants expressed the desire to support others by passing on the very strategies they had learned and described how being part of this broader change helped them to trust themselves more and build even more self-strength.

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<sup>9</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 1 February 2018.

## 2. “Forced marriage is a family issue”: Pressure on families is a driver of forced marriage

### Tamana’s story

*“I know the consequences are forever – it happened to me... My uncle had me get married when I was too young. I was 16 years old and he took me to Afghanistan to marry to my cousin. I didn’t want to marry and my parents [in Afghanistan] were not happy. They [my parents] tried to change his mind, but then there was a big conflict between them [over my marriage] and I had no choice... I wanted to stop the conflict so I got married.”*

Tamana, FGD, 7 February 2018

The communities consulted primarily identified “forced marriage as a family issue”<sup>10</sup> in that it does not exist in a vacuum and repercussions can be felt throughout the immediate and broader family structures. Families experience multiple pressures from community and extended family that contribute to parents forcing a marriage. This can range from community pressure to adhere to traditional cultural practices, or community pressure on families to maintain reputation and to marry their children young to control their sexuality. There is also an economic pressure on families to force transnational marriages to acquire an Australian visa, the promise of a better life for the migrating party and a stream of financial support for remaining family in the country of origin.

Tamana’s experience epitomises the family dynamics and pressures that drive transnational forced marriages. Tamana’s uncle brought her to Australia by claiming to be her father, while her parents remained in Afghanistan. Her now husband is one of her uncle’s cousins, who Tamana lives with, along with their two children. Her husband’s migration to Australia, and in turn the financial support he is now able to provide for his wider family still living in Afghanistan, enables he and his family to have a better life.

Tamana reflected that while she had little power to influence the choice of her husband, she initially expressed refusal. Because her parents (who she had been living separate from) were supportive, they collectively tried to negotiate with her uncle. This negotiation collided with Tamana’s uncle’s desire to make things ‘better’ for the broader family. Tamana recalled this setting off a “violent conflict” between her parents and uncle and with few other options, Tamana elected to resolve family conflict by agreeing to marry.

Young women from the communities consulted found these multiple pressures to enter a marriage against their wishes difficult to resist and described a vacuum when seeking conflict resolution support from those around them. When young people did challenge their parents and

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<sup>10</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 13 January 2018.

extended families' desire for them marry, it caused considerable conflict which families are poorly equipped to deal with, as Tamana's story above, and the following comments illustrate:

*"Others are too afraid to step in because it is seen as a family issue."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*"With forced marriage, there is always pressure."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

In these instances, young people described knowing their role was to settle the conflict: *"Women always sacrifice"*<sup>11</sup> themselves for their families' wellbeing. As observed in Tamana's story, not all women successfully garner the support of their immediate and/or extended family to resist these pressures upon them and their families to marry. This section examines each of these pressures in turn.

## 1. Community pressure to maintain cultural practices

### a. Taken-for-granted ways of organising marriage

All four communities engaged in this consultation described that arranged marriages are a traditional cultural practice where parents (often fathers) select a husband for their daughters.<sup>12</sup> For example:

*"It is the duty of the parents to select a partner [for their daughter] and to marry their children."*

FGD, 13 January 2018

*"The family as a whole chooses the partner... but ultimately the head of family [the grandfather] decides."*

Advisory Committee meeting, 22 February 2018

*"In the Afghan community... only listen to dad. It is often he who finds the one for the marriage."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"Marriages may be arranged [between families] since birth or when the child is 8 or 9 years old, and when they are old enough they will marry... it is a promise... it is not a choice."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

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<sup>11</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 22 February 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Participants from Sri Lanka and India noted that this tradition is changing. Young people are choosing their own marital partners – so called "love marriages", and increasingly marriages are occurring across religious, caste and economic differences.

Forced marriage practices are culturally engrained in taken-for-granted ways of organising marriage that *“has been going on for generations”*<sup>13</sup>. These marriages may not be viewed as forced, but more as arranged (without options) through traditional cultural practices. Parents and communities may be completely unaware that these cultural practices can entail forcing their daughters to marry against her wishes. Parents themselves will not have considered that the girl or boy should be consulted and/ or have options. Opening options for their children to choose their spouse is foreign to them. For example:

*“Sometimes parents are doing it [forcing a marriage] without knowing what they are doing... Also, parents don’t explain why – they don’t know themselves. They are like sheep – just following.”*

FGD, 13 January

*“Some families are so, so strict – there is no freedom at all. And they don’t explain why they are doing what they do, or why they are forcing what they force – and they may not even question if it’s logical. It’s just what happens.”*

FGD, 25 January

Moreover, community members explained that cultural practices themselves force the marriage:

*“Even if forced marriage is not forced by the family, it is forced by culture.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

*“It is not a forced marriage but culture – the way it has been done forever – girls are prepared / groomed to accept this and want this.”*

FGD, 21 January; also noted in FGD, 1 February 2018

*“If the girl can’t make the decision, it’s a forced marriage in Islam. If they complain later, it’s a forced marriage.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

Many young girls do not expect to have a choice. Parents – typically fathers or grandfathers as the patriarch of the family – make marriage decisions on their daughters’ behalf. Women described it in the following ways:

*“This is just her life and she has to accept it.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“You are forced not to see it as a forced marriage.”*

Advisory Committee, 22 February 2018

*“The girl has no choice and it is ingrained in her that an arranged or forced marriage will happen. The girl doesn’t even think there is a choice. She thinks she has no options and the lack of options are emphasised when girls are isolated...”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

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<sup>13</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 1 February 2018.

*“It is taboo if a young person makes their own decision [about their spouse]... Yes, people in the community will start asking ‘Why can’t they [the parents] control their children’.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Moreover, to say no to a marriage can be seen as disrespectful to ones’ parents. Children are expected to show respect by following their parents’ guidance and wishes, and familial support is often linked to this deference:

*“To say no is disrespectful to parents and community... children trust their parents’ judgement.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“They listen to the parents’ choice [of husband] because then they will get family support. If any individual chooses their own spouse, they lose the support of the family and community.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

Parents feel that their daughters are too young and immature to select an appropriate spouse, but more importantly it is the parents’ traditional role to do so:

*“The boy or girl are too young to make the decision. You will realise when it’s too late. Not a good reputation for love marriages. Parents are worried their daughters won’t have a second chance.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*“Culture-wise, there is shame when someone looks for themselves for a partner. It’s the parent’s role to look for partners – in traditional families. Parents don’t look with children. It’s their responsibility and role. The conflict arises when a child looks themselves. They are not mature enough to look.”*

Advisory Committee, 22 Feb 2018

*“My mother feels responsible and she has to follow her responsibility...”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

The costs of contesting a forced marriage are felt by the girl herself, and her family. This contestation can be seen to bring shame to the family, and the girl risks being cut off from the support of family and community. Family members may also receive threats both in Australia and in countries of origin. For example:

*“The girl knows there is no way out of marriage. If she fights, there will be threats to her brothers and father, so she will stay quiet. She also has to be an example to her younger siblings on how to be married... so she stays. There is much pressure on the girl ... community pressure not to break the marriage.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“She thinks that she can’t say no because she will have no support or community.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“This girl said no and she got kicked out of the family... disowned and is doing it tough.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“The girl can't say no because she will get a reputation for saying no...she is fearful of this.”*  
FGD, 24 February 2018

Because of these fears, girls are coerced by their families to willingly enter the marriage:

*“Some willingly enter a forced or arranged marriage because they know that if they agree their family is behind them and when the time comes with problems in the marriage, they will have help.”*  
FGD, 24 February 2018

The oldest daughter in the family experiences additional pressure to be a role model for younger siblings (as noted above), and upon marriage, are expected to fulfil all domestic and care responsibilities. If parents have difficulties with the marriages of their older children, they may start providing more options to younger children. One woman in a group discussion – the oldest in a family of four daughters – described her situation in the following way:

*“The oldest never gets to choose... I was the first sacrifice... now I am always a slave... my younger sisters got to choose.”*  
FGD, 1 February 2018

These concessions made by parents can be seen as the parent's desire for their children to be happy both in their lives and their marriages:

*“Parents want a good life for you... they want you to have a better life than what they did... parents just want their best for your future... they want something good for you.”*  
FGD, 25 January 2018

## **2. Community pressure on family reputation**

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### **a. Reputation and being valued by community**

Families experience community pressure to marry their children, which can exacerbate their coercive behaviour and lead to them limiting their children's options. Families feel this pressure strongly because individual and family identity is strongly tied to community perceptions and reputation. For example:

*“It is always about community opinion... [people] do not do things for their family but for the maintenance of community reputation.”*  
FGD, 25 January 2018

The marriage of women, girls, boys and men cement relationships between families. When daughters are around the age of 16 or 17, community people will start to ask the parents when they will be getting married.

*“Parents start getting worried when the girl is 18, or 22 or 25... they need to get her married... [If she is not married] others will be thinking that she has a boyfriend or is having sex outside of marriage and in our culture this is shame. When their child gets married, they feel relaxed.”*  
Advisory Committee, 22 February 2018

*“The community gossip more about girls being unmarried, and parents are more concerned about girls [than boys] being unmarried.”*

Advisory Committee, 22 February 2018

*“You do not want people to talk about your child... even myself, I am very open minded and it still affects me.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

When parents are not organising a marriage, people in the community start to question the families’ reputation, particularly community perceptions of how the family functions, how the children are being raised and their religiosity. Their perceived inability to control their child, raises questions in the community about what else they may not be able to control in the family. Community speculation on each of these points raises deeper questions about the family honour, shame and value. Community members can be judgmental, spread rumours and gossip, and in these ways inadvertently pressure families to behave in socially acceptable ways that maintain their reputation. For example:

*“If you don’t wear a headscarf, someone will judge you and blame your mum – they will say to her and about her ‘she can’t even control her own child’ – and the mum won’t take it out on a stranger in the community, she will take it out on the daughter. So forcing the girl to wear the headscarf in the first place saves the family judgement and shame from the community.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*“Parents still make the decision about marriage...People in the community will start asking ‘why can’t they control their children?’.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Individual and family reputation are intimately tied to community perceptions of their value. As a consequence, when community speculates about the reputation of a family, there is much at stake, and families act in ways that prioritises maintenance of community reputation:

*“Reputation is everything to having value in the community and as a person.”*

Advisory Committee, 22 February 2018

*“It is always about the family and keeping it safe and protected and keeping the reputation clean and if the community expectation isn’t met – it causes problems in the family. All families are afraid of this and it is a huge pressure.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Parents experience this pressure from community in Australia and from extended family overseas to marry their daughters:

*“Everyone is connected strongly in community and the pressure is great by everyone. Community think it is the responsibility of the parents...so they shame them or they feel shame and they respond by getting the child married.”*

Advisory Committee, 22 February 2018

*“It’s a chain pulling... [my] extended family in Pakistan are already deciding about my girls and boys marriage... [both under 10 years of age].”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

Families use many arguments to force their daughters to marry, including misrepresenting religious beliefs to obtain agreement. For example:

*“When forced by the family, they have to accept. They blackmail them or use religion.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

Forced marriages are also used to maintain family reputation and honour, and in particular to control a girls’ sexuality. For example:

*“If the girl is pregnant... marriage protects the reputation and honour of the family.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“Forced marriage is a way to control the daughters’ sexuality – if she is married the husband can take care of this.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“Parents might think she will be western and have lots of boyfriends so they want her to marry.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

#### **b. Acting in the child’s best interest**

Marital decisions are made in what parents believe to be their child’s best interests: to protect their wellbeing and it is hoped that a good marriage will bring a successful life. When women marry, they move to live with their new husband and his family, and for this reason known families are chosen to keep daughters safe and close to her natal family.

Marrying girls young is also desirable as it means *“the girl will grow up with, and get used to her husband’s family, who become her own family”*<sup>14</sup>. Past experiences can also teach families to be careful in their selection of husband, another reason to marry daughters into a known family. For example:

*“We know this family or these people, so it is safer for the children to marry... we know his upbringing and if we know him, they prefer him for their daughter... it is hard to trust nowadays.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

Similarly, fathers want to protect their daughters, and arranging a marriage to someone within their networks of family and friends is seen to be one way to do so. Marriage to someone that the family and parents know is also preferable to young people choosing their own partner who may be a complete stranger to the family:

*“Men ask ‘Do you know why we are doing it?’ Our children might not know the other person. They might be into drugs. But, this person we know.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

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<sup>14</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 21 January 2018.

Families experience pressure upon their reputation and value – socially, as a family and individually – and to manage these pressures they arrange a marriage for their daughters. Families perceive that everyone’s wellbeing is taken care of through marriage and their reputation as a family – and thus as individuals – is protected from shame.

Marriage is primarily considered to be a union between two extended families, and they play a key role in arranging and keeping marriages together. Women marry into families and move in with their in-laws and the early days of a marriage require her to learn how to manage in this new environment. Pakistani-Australian women described this process in the following ways:

*“After marriage, I took on the whole family... they [all the extended family on my husband’s side] come into the marriage.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“I carry my husband’s family like a baby.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“Marry me, marry my family.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

One woman described this adjustment as *“a pressure that could make you tired”* but because it is the start of the marriage, you like doing it and then you get used to it. Women have to adjust to their new living situation and learn the things they are able to push back on and what they are not. Women from Sri Lanka and Southern India spoke about the resultant favouritism that is given to the husband’s family, over her own. Women in all groups spoke about the marital difficulties they experience as a consequence of involvement of in-laws and extended family, typically from the husband’s side of the family.

### 3. Economic pressure for a better life and financial support for family in country of origin

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Forced marriages can be used to keep wealth within the family, and this perception was noted by a number of participants within group discussions.

*“Marriage within the family keeps inheritance with the family... women cannot say no to marriage because they have to maintain the families’ standard of living.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“In Pakistan the rule is to marry within the family so that the capital and assets do not go out of the family.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*“You will lose your inheritance, your extended family. What will happen to you when you're older?”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“In Africa, forced marriage is seen as a lucrative business and is used as a way to not allow wealth to leave the family.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

Parents want their children to have a better life than themselves and this means financial security and wealth. This desire is another source of pressure that is put upon families to arrange transnational marriages as earlier noted. This was expressed in focus groups as:

*"[There is] pressure from parents' brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles to marry so that their son can have a good life."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*"Everyone wants to see their children rich... Parents wants children to have a good future...being rich means happiness."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

For many families, marriage to a wealthy man is seen to be a certain route to a good life. In these instances, age differences are not seen as important by family members pushing the union. Girls can also be seen to be a burden and marriage to a wealthy man is anticipated to bring her happiness.

*"A man will make a good life because they have money."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"What else do you want...he is wealthy..."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

Financial gains can also be the goal of forced marriages of young women in Australia to men in a country of origin. This is seen as a pathway to financially support family back 'home', rather than relating to the relationship itself:

*"Young men from Afghanistan [come] and marry young girls in Australia. Most of the young men who come over for marriage in Australia are here to send money back to support their family so they can help them to leave Afghanistan and come to Australia. This is the expectation. There is no thought about making a nice life together or for the girl."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"Mainly forced marriages are for money and migration, which really equates to money."*

FGD, 21 January 2018

These transnational forced marriages are driven by both economic support and the desire for an Australian visa but also because families want their daughters to marry men with cultural and traditional values, and not men who have been raised in Australia. For example:

*"Families here are the lifeline for those back home [in Sierra Leone]."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*"So many families are pressuring girls to marry a cousin or someone with Afghan values as oppose to young Afghan men here."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"If you marry someone from overseas, the family back home gets support. Plus it provides safety to the person from overseas. They think the person from overseas is more disciplined [and will be a better spouse]."*

FGD, 24 February 2018

An additional issue arises in these situations however, as recently migrated men typically have traditional expectations of their new wives' behaviour and these are quite different to those of young women who have grown up in Australia. This type of tension can cause conflict in relationships. For example, some focus group discussion participants expressed the view that:

*“People who come here may have expectations. But you don't hear that until they are here. You might hear they just used them and the marriage to get here. Then they marry someone else here.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

There are also economic dimensions to these transnational marriages and significant amounts of money are paid to those who sponsor visas:

*“The way they get the visa sponsored is that they pay money...I have heard so many people say that they can't get married overseas because the cost have increased to \$10,000 for a visa.”*

FGD, 13 January 2018

For the recently arrived Rohingya community, many young men arrived four to five years ago, without wives and families of their own. These men want to marry Rohingya women to maintain their culture but there are very few Rohingya women in Australia. The families of those in Australia are able to ask for large dowry payments of between \$50,000 and \$70,000. This puts significant financial strain on men and raises questions around women's consent to marry. These economic factors further contribute to the complexity of forced marriage.

### 3. “The relationship is ‘out of whack’”: Inter-generational conflict between parents and children

#### Between freedom and fear: between change and continuity

*“I became a mother when I started living in Australia. Part of myself stays in Afghanistan and it is totally different to how we raise our children here in Australia. Half of my thoughts are still relating to Afghanistan and we need to value [our children’s] thoughts and beliefs and it may be challenging for us. Like when my daughter finishes her university degree, she wants to go travelling to see the world... this is her dream and she wants to live her dream but this is scaring me because I am saying ‘When I am around you, I can be with you... and what if something happens to you?’... I also want her to live her life and enjoy her life, you only have live once... but then there are things [inside me] saying ‘No, she is going to go away from me’... there are some points that are holding me back. I want to support her but I am fearful as well.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*“There is a gap between our generation and our kids... we had a little consent [when we married]... but now it is different for our kids. ‘It is my choice even for clothes’... small choices in everyday life can lead to behaviour change.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

All communities consulted described inter-generational differences between parents and their children. The values of those who grew up in countries of origin – typically parents and extended family members – and those who have, or are growing up in Australia are increasingly distinct. Communities identified two key challenges in relationships between parents and their children: First, tension between parents giving children choices and making decisions on their behalf; and second, the need for greater communication skills to address the above two relationship issues.

#### 1. Providing choice

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#### Creating space for choice – balancing a parents’ role with providing children choice

*“Now young people have more choices. If we can't make them wear jewellery they don't like, how can we make them accept a marriage?”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

Focus group participants were concerned that children were being raised with different values to themselves, which they described in the following ways:

*“Here the parents have no say... kids [have] rights... and no one can force them... here parents can’t say anything... we have less control.”*

FGD, 7 February 2018

*“At an early age, children are given choices and opinion and choices are valued – my daughter is one and a half years old and she chooses her own book already. With choice given early, it helps them grow...”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“[Children] can do whatever they want to... [they] don’t have to listen to their parents.”* FGD,  
10 February 2018

Women from Southern India and Sri Lanka expressed wanting to give their children freedom because they did not have this when they were children:

*“Whatever we suffered... we don’t want our children to suffer... [so] we give them freedom... In India children do not buy things themselves... but here they tell you what they want... there is less control here.”*

FGD, 7 February 2018

Young Afghan women identified the value of being given choices and space to make their own decisions, such as whether they wear a headscarf. For example:

*“My mum gave me a choice to wear the scarf or not when I was 12 years... when we arrived in Australia... for my sister it means a lot, so she wears it. For me, I choose not to. My mum tried to understand. A lot of people don’t have those choices – they aren’t given the choice.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*“When I have children first I will teach them [my daughters] Islam and religion – the meaning that it holds and then they can decide out of that.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

In contrast, another young woman’s mother did not give her a choice and she resisted her mother’s decision. But when she was given the space, to question her own beliefs and values, she eventually made her own decision and returned to the practices observed by her family (*refer to Sofia’s story on page 20*). Young women value being given space to question their beliefs and practices. In families where choices are not given to children, family priorities and preferences, largely informed by traditional cultural practices, shape children’s lives.

Some women in the group discussions reported that they would not give their daughters the freedom to make their own decisions. For example, one mother of two described how she sees the headscarf itself as an object that gives women freedom and safety, and for this reason will insist her daughter wears it:

*“With my daughter, ‘I hope she wears a scarf and I will brainwash her and make choices for her until she’s an adult.’*

*(Second girl) ‘In a healthy way – not brainwashing.’*

*(First girl) I will tell her ‘Now she’s got her wings [her scarf] on’ and I will say to her: ‘You are free to do whatever you want because my daughter you can do anything*

*a man can do'."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Afghan women recognised the costs – such as conflict between parents and children, and between husband and wife – of not giving children and young people choices. Some women explained that in families where there is little choice, parents believe they are making these restrictions in the best interest of their children, which can reflect not only their own experiences and levels of education, but wider cultural norms from their home countries. For example:

*"Parents lack education and knowledge – they are over protective. 'They think they are protecting their children, but they are destroying their child because they do not let them choose'."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*"There a differences in education between parents and children...parents have grown up in a country at war...they are not educated but their children are."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*"Sometimes mums want to let kids choose, but husbands don't. It causes problems within the marriage."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Some women felt fearful of these changes in values and observed their own tendency to revert to the way things were done in their country of origin. For example:

*"Here it is so different to how I was raised in Afghanistan – and what I was taught – and it is challenging for me when my children want to be different [to how I was raised]... and they want to follow their dreams – and this scares me. I want [my daughter] to live her life. I want to support her, but some fears make me want to hold her back – the way we used to do things in Afghanistan. It is still in my brain... safety... fear... culture."*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*"Parents will always go back to their own beliefs or what they know. But they try to trust us [their children] – maybe 50 per cent they do, and 50 per cent they try to push their beliefs on us."*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*"We are scared...we try to raise them in our [Sri Lankan] cultural way at home...to know and respect their parents and to give explanations of why we do particular things, so they are aware right away."*

FGD, 7 February 2018

Women from Sri Lanka and Southern India who participated in this consultation also expressed feeling isolated. Their families were more nuclear than in countries of origin, where extended family tend to live nearby and be a ready source of support in raising children. In the absence of extended family, they have greater childcare responsibilities than in their countries of origin:

*"We have no extended family... no grandparents to teach our children about culture... we women have extra responsibility... there are only four people in the household... [at home]"*

*there are more relatives around... we are more isolated and have less support.”*

FGD, 7 February 2018

Similarly, the newly arrived (since 2013) Rohingya men consulted felt there was limited community level social support available if they faced challenges:

*“Our community is new... we are not strong yet... we have no elders to go to if you have any problems... [we] have no community place of our own.”*

FGD, 10 February 2018

The Rohingya population in Australia is also mainly made up of men, most of whom are living a “single life” despite wanting to marry, as there are very few Rohingya women in Australia. As a result, it is very difficult for them to maintain their cultural practices. Peers were noted to have greater influence than in other groups engaged in this study, and many young people experienced peer pressure to defy their parents’ wishes. Rohingya men explained for example:

*“Friends are quite influential against the parents... friends encourage young people to go out to parties when parents do not want them to go.”*

FGD, 10 February 2018

Young Afghan women also experienced this pressure from peers and felt confused:

*“There is a lot of peer pressure to be disrespectful to your parents... kids think that they know better than parents and sort of this is true... but the relationship is out of whack... children hold power because of their education.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*“Some say it is their culture and girls should listen to their mother and father. The young generation say ‘No it’s my life and [they] don’t want to do this.’ As a result, there is a divide – what do I want to do or listen to mum and dad... young people are confused and not sure where to go.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Parents are raising children in situations where social and community structures and the values embedded within them are different to those that they were raised with. In order to navigate these challenges and the tensions that arise when giving their children choices, parents need to feel empowered and supported. Participants suggested that parents learn how to befriend their children and build understanding and closeness between them, so that if their children do have problems, they feel comfortable to share with them. Moreover, many mothers shared that they mediated between their daughters and husbands when tensions arose. In these mediations, they navigated through issues to find creative solutions that adhered to cultural values while still allowing space for change.

## **2. Building communication skills**

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## Empowering and educating parents

*“If you can educate the parents... the children are fine, because they are growing up in this society. If parents know how to deal with their kids... if the parents are fine, the kids should be ok.”* FGD, 13 January 2018

*“We need to change ourselves... to be able to change ourselves and have successful kids.”*  
FGD, 24 February 2018

Different opinions on parenting and decision-making regarding children are a key source of conflict in families. Communities consulted wanted to learn how to communicate better because they recognised that resolving conflict within families – in particular between parents and their children – requires strong communication skills. Many participants reflected that when communication breaks down between parents and their children, relationships become distanced, as neither side takes the time or makes the effort to get to know the other’s view by really listening to them. Young women in particular, suggested that communication issues are a significant factor in forced marriage. For example:

*“I understand that forced marriage is an easy fix, that it is just a communication issue.”* FGD, 25 January 2018

*“Forced marriages happen because there is not enough communication between parents and children.”*  
FGD, 13 January 2018

When communication and trust has broken down, it is extremely difficult for a young girl to have enough courage to raise her voice and contest a forced marriage. Women experience immense difficulty in saying no to marriage or breaking off an engagement even when there is violence occurring. This highlights the multiple pressures women feel to go ahead with forced marriages.

*“She is engaged – he [her fiancé] is abusing her already but she won’t break it off even if she knows better.”*  
FGD, 1 February 2018

Focus group participants also described how hierarchical relationships, whether between men and women, husband and wife, or parents and their children, contribute to a breakdown in communication. Although communication and parenting challenges affect all of these groups, women identified that engaging their husbands in conversations about these changes in values is particularly difficult:

*“We have conversation... communicate... but most men are not listening... they do not see it as sharing a life like women do, they are not listening.”*  
FGD, 1 February 2018

Additionally, children can be afraid to raise issues with their parents for fear of being reproached:

*“The reason behind the lack of communication between parents and children is because a lot of children are afraid that if they say something or raise something, they are going to get beaten up by the parents and get in trouble... they are scared and so that is why there is no communication about arranged marriage or forced marriage. She is very scared to*

*communicate with the parents.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

All communities consulted agreed that stronger communication skills would help to address forced marriage issues. As a focus group participant shared:

*“Communication is very effective in any situation – between husband and wife, siblings, parents, without communication nothing will be solved.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Another young woman felt that communication *“can solve everything”*<sup>15</sup>. Even though communicating with parents on sensitive issues can be uncomfortable and women hesitated, they recognised how important it is and requested support to build their skills.

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<sup>15</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 25 January 2018.

## 4. “We need to help the whole family”: Creating safety to seek services

### The enduring impact of seeking help outside the family

*“If your parents are trying to get you married off and if someone comes from whatever department or police and tries to explain to your parents that you live in Australia... this is our law... someone comes from outside and actually explaining, ‘Hey she does have a choice and you can’t do it like this.’...You would shock the parents, and the daughter would be like, ‘Great I have someone supporting me.’[But] After they [the department or police] goes...you are a disappointment, an embarrassment... she might get killed... but in here [Australia] you are not going to get killed... they would mentally kill you, mentally pressure you, mentally drain everything out of you... lock you up in room, won’t let you eat, won’t let you do anything... some parents are like that... isolate you, take away your freedom... don’t let you see your friends, lock you up... mentally drain you from this world... you might get anxiety or depression... [until you agree to the marriage]... or they [parents] blame you for bringing shame on the family that the police got involved or she commits suicide because the parents do not listen... and she does not want her parents to get in trouble so she kills herself.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*“There has to be somewhere that can support both the husband and the wife. They can’t afford a psychologist. They need someone from the community they can trust who can help”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

When women’s own strategies to avoid a forced marriage through negotiation with their families and extended families are not working, they turn to sources of help beyond the family and the community: to teachers, counsellors and other professionals. While seeking outside help may provide young people with a feeling of support, nothing may change within the family and by making the issue public things may even become worse. Communities consulted identified the need for culturally appropriate preventative community and service sector strategies to engage and resolve problems within families that empower parents and young people, and give them choices.

Women can often be reluctant to seek help beyond the family. Focus group participants explained that young girls in particular find it very difficult to reach out for help. They may not know about the range of supports available to them, or are afraid to reach beyond their family for help to address what they feel is a family issue:

*“They will be feeling crushed, isolated and feel that they cannot talk to anyone... It is very difficult for a girl to say that she needs help. Even if someone asks her she is likely to say I am ok.”*

FGD, 21 January 2018

*“Most Muslim women have no confidence to talk about their private lives.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Even though there are many sources of support available for young people, they do not always seek help, even if they are aware of these services. Women in the focus groups wondered why they felt isolated when they have many potential sources of support around them:

*“We have all this around us, but why are we isolated?”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*“Even though we have lots of sources of support, we do not seek them.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

*“Forced marriage girls are very weak. The majority do not say anything... they don’t want to dob their parents in and disappoint the parents... they are afraid of this.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

Young women in the focus groups felt that *“it is bad to talk to someone, [better to] stay quiet and fight for themselves”*<sup>16</sup>. They perceived real risks for stepping outside of family for help:

*“If women go to support services, they are making their own decision and managing their own risk.”*

FGD, 24 February 2018

Furthermore, young people shared their concerns with regard to safety and confidentiality when seeking help outside of their family:

*“Girls didn’t feel safe enough to come and talk to me [community leader] about their forced marriage... they’re afraid of being judged and gossip.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Service providers are often cultural outsiders who despite their desire to support young women facing forced marriage, can instead have the potential to make things worse for the young woman and her family:

*“[I] couldn’t allow service providers to help me... it would make things worse for me and my family. It would make everything worse because they are outsiders... what happens when the service provider leaves the front door... I still have to face possible domestic violence... Who is there to help or protect me [when the service provider leaves]?”*

FGD 21 January 2018

Some participants felt that breakdown in communication between parents and their children leaves young people with few options but to call the police in crisis situations. Women observed that police do not engage much with the complexity of the situation and may elect to remove young girls from families. For example:

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<sup>16</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 25 January 2018.

*“She either has to go with it [the forced marriage] or has to involve the police... Breakdown in communication leads to this ‘either or’.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

*“They called police but they did not communicate so much with her family and the police took her away and now she lives away from her family... Who knows what sort of life she has... they think that they are helping but in some areas they are causing more problems... I am not saying the police did something wrong, they rescued this girl but they do not get help early... instead of taking her away from the family... help this family to solve their problem rather than breaking family up and taking her away.”*

FGD, 25 January 2018

Support services (including the police) need to be able to engage with families to work through their problems. Consulted communities identified that there was an opportunity to work with the community through community liaisons and cultural experts. This engagement can assist families to address the issues they experiencing. Working with communities and families in this way would provide an intermediate level of support that sits between families and formal support services, such as child protection authorities and police that are outside their communities. Such support would ideally provide an early and preventative approach to forced marriage, and would sit alongside crisis response support, providing a broad spectrum of assistance for people at different levels of risk.

When positively expressed, community is an invaluable source of social connection, support, networking and information. By being seen in community, families build up social networks through which information about support services, employment and other opportunities can be drawn upon. One woman for example, explained that she was at home parenting her four children, but because she never gets out into the community she has no social networks through which she might hear about opportunities. She explained that without opportunities and connections to community, she feels doubtful she will have anyone to call on if and when she needs support.

*“You can learn about services or opportunities for help from a friend and you never know what you may need in future. Being in community, known in the community (as a good person) and socialising builds up social capital for the future.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

*“We all must socialise with other people beyond our family... It’s important to be known so you have more people to go to when you need support... You’ll always be in the community and you will need support and services – that help with family violence for example.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Socialising in community exposes people to new ideas, provides potential occasions to learn from and be supported by others, and promotes open mindedness. As information and knowledge spreads through community, there is an opportunity to create space for learning and dialogue around forced marriage through community. The following strategies were identified.

## **1. Empowerment opportunities around forced marriage in schools**

Schools often have respectful relationship and sex education included as a part of the curriculum. Inclusion of information on child marriage and forced marriage, as well as specific information on marriage laws and the consequences of forced marriage could be incorporated into these sessions. Information could be prepared specifically to be sent home to parents, who would be required to sign a compulsory form to note that the information had been read, and return it to the school. Additionally, information could be shared with parents through playgroups (attached to various schools, including English Language schools) and/or information sessions for parents. These approaches would increase the knowledge and awareness of young people, as well as their parents.

## **2. Provide education opportunities for religious leaders around Australian marriage law and consent**

Religious leaders are key community leaders who provide mediation and counselling when there are marriage problems. They also have cultural authority to authorise marriage. As leaders, they are legally accountable and are obligated to follow Australian marital law. To ensure all religious leaders fully understand Australian law and the power dynamics embedded when seeking a young girls consent to marry, additional training and dialogue is required. Close consultation with religious leaders is foundational to achieve this goal.

Religious leaders who participated in this consultant repeatedly explained that Islam does not advocate or tolerate forced marriage. Upon conducting a marriage, however, many expressed that while they do ask both parties if they consent to the marriage prior to it, they were less aware of what it might take for a young person to feel comfortable enough to say no when her family and community are encouraging a marriage. The context in which consent is gained is blurry considering the familial, community, cultural and religious pressures on young people. Participants explained that while girls are directly asked by religious leaders and/or female community elders if they wish to go ahead with the marriage, it is often at the time of the ceremony and in the company of others. Religious leaders also had little awareness of the types of support young people, particularly young girls, may need to be able to say no.

A process whereby prior consent is gained in a safe space where a young person is free to express refusal without repercussions is one mechanism religious leaders could support and encourage. Using religious texts and phrases to develop and share preventative messages among the community is another helpful strategy, as is ensuring the same messages are being shared by other religious leaders. Ongoing engagement with religious leaders is required to co-develop appropriate strategies that make visible the familial and community pressures a young person may be subject to when providing their consent to a marriage.

## **3. Community empowerment classes**

Women and men who were consulted suggested the need to have more community meetings to openly discuss issues around parenting, communication and forced marriage, in order to create deep and lasting change. It was suggested that separate meetings be held for men and women, as well as boys and girls. These classes for children could focus on confidence building, negotiation and respect for parents. Classes for parents are important to ensure they too feel

empowered, adequately equipped, skilled and included/informed in school programs their children may be engaged in. Transparency is required and parents need information and skills to be able to manage any resultant tensions.

#### 4. Engage families in a culturally safe and respectful way

When there is a family crisis around a forced marriage, participants discussed the importance of statutory bodies approaching families in a respectful way so as to avoid shame being brought upon the family. While not wanting the issue to be ignored, they instead suggested that if the reputation of the family could be spared, parents are more likely to accept information and be open behaviour change. Most importantly, this approach will also maintain the young person's safety once authorities have left the home or disengaged. As a starting point, participants suggested engagement with community liaisons and/or religious leaders who know the cultural and community contexts, and are able to address the problems in the family through mediation:

*“These days Imams who are trusted and know about these issues can act as a mediator or take on educational role with the families. The families will listen to the Imam.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

Some focus group participants felt that bringing the police in to address the issue was shame inducing and most felt that in these cases, everyone loses safety<sup>17</sup> because:

*“There is no confidentiality... all the neighbours and everyone around will know what is going on.”*

FGD, 1 February 2018

In contrast, some women did not care about what the neighbours or anyone else in the community thought and had no hesitation in calling the police. For these women, forced marriage is primarily a legal issue that requires legal redress to save a young girl's life. Others suggested that if the police are to be called, the family needs to be warned first to ensure they are prepared, and it can be safe and confidential process for everyone involved.

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<sup>17</sup> In this context 'safety' is used to refer to confidentiality and the avoidance of gossip and rumours.

## Conclusion

Recognising the shortage of documented experiences of those affected by forced marriage and a gap in understanding around community-led solutions, Red Cross sought to engage with, listen to and empower communities to shape key messages to inform policies and programs on forced marriage.

The consultation uncovered four community-identified strategies which young people use to negotiate, delay or prevent a forced marriage. These innovative strategies highlight that when young women are provided with opportunities and empowered to develop personal beliefs and goals, they are more able to 'stand for themselves' and utilise their 'self-strength.' Furthermore, when relationships between family members are respectful and healthy, a safe space for dialogue is created and a young person is more able to negotiate when and who and if they marry. Participants also described strategies for broader social and attitudinal change, and saw themselves as having a valuable role in this process.

Communities consulted encouraged a broader understanding of the pressures that can drive a forced marriage, in that often pressure is not just felt by the individual, but at times by the whole family. A deeper understanding was also advised as pressures described were lengthy and so intense that standing up to them could be incredibly difficult. Three categories of pressure were identified, including pressure on families to maintain cultural practices, pressure by the wider community in Australia and overseas to maintain family honour, and economic pressures.

Inter-generational differences, a mostly unrecognised tension running through many family relationships, was described as leading to family conflict, resulting in limited space to negotiate future options. Participants highlighted a need for conflict resolution and communication skill building to begin addressing this. Young people in particular expressed wanting to show parents love and respect, but felt unsure how to simultaneously communicate their desire for freedom and independence.

Finally, communities were pragmatic about the fact that in some cases, strategies to negotiate, delay or avoid a forced marriage will fail and it is at these times when safety nets are critical. In addition to having strong linkages with family and the wider community, young people must also be aware of and able to reach out to formal sources of support. The need for these services to be culturally appropriate and relevant is critical. Engagement with communities to develop accessible, culturally sensitive and effective formal support services will ensure support is available when needed most.

## Appendix 1: Methodology

This project adopted a qualitative, participatory and asset-based approach. These principles aimed to ensure that the consultation process itself empowered participants by building a space of trust and respect where their voices would be heard and valued. The asset-based approach inspired questions that uncovered community led solutions, an intentional reframe from a more traditional, problem-solving model.

### Advisory Committee

A project Advisory Committee was formed to ensure that community representatives were actively involved in the design of the consultation process, and were recognised and valued as cultural experts with particular insights into their communities. The Advisory Committee consisted of eight people (three Red Cross staff – Manager of the Support for Trafficked People Program, National Coordinator of the Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building Project, the Consultation consultant), four community representatives (one man and three women) and an expert in forced marriage.

The first task of the Advisory Committee was to design the process to engage the community liaisons, and to learn from and about their experiences of working in their communities on forced marriage issues. In particular, the Advisory Committee considered that it was important to establish an ethic of listening and learning from community liaisons and from the men and women who participated in the project, because as one member shared “those who feel it, know it.” Moreover, those who experience the risk of, or forced marriage itself, often know the solution(s) to the issues they face, and when a trusting space is established, open-ended and exploratory questions are asked, solutions are likely to emerge. As such, an appropriate set of questions were co-designed to open discussion about forced marriage with community members. The identified discussion and question strategy was trailed in a focus group discussion with the 16 community liaisons (4 men and 12 women) from seven different communities self-identifying as being effected by the issue of forced marriage.<sup>18</sup> At the end of each discussion, feedback was sought from participants on the process and suggested improvements.

The Advisory Committee met on two occasions – prior to engagement with the community liaisons and before any focus group discussions were held, and after the sharing of the draft report. Committee meetings were strategically timed to maximise member input into the project design phase and into the interpretation of findings. Both Committee meetings were held several days before focus group discussions were held with the community liaisons.

### Focus Group Discussions

Given the sensitivity of forced marriage in some affected communities, this project worked in collaboration with community liaisons working with Red Cross’ Forced Marriage Capacity Building project. Community liaisons invited members from their sphere of influence to attend a focus

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<sup>18</sup> The seven communities include: Rohingya, Afghan, Pakistani, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, and Sierra Leonean.

group discussion that they were invited to co-facilitate with the consultant. Seven community liaisons expressed interest, with five resulting a focus group discussion being held. Although considerable effort was made to speak with men and women from communities from three African countries, they only felt comfortable speaking openly with the community liaison officer and not in the presence of Red Cross.

A series of eight focus group discussions were held with a total of 89 people (30 men and 59 women) mainly from four affected communities – Afghan, Pakistani, Rohingya and Tamil speakers from Sri Lanka and southern India. Some insight was also gained into Sierra Leonean, Bengali and Hindi experiences through three of the community liaisons.<sup>19</sup>

The focus group discussion with religious leaders followed a slightly different set of questions with the aim of gaining insights into their community role (*see Appendix 2*). In hindsight, starting this focus group discussion with the series of questions about healthy, strong and respectful relationship – following the structure used in the other focus group discussions – may have provided more grounded information on attitudes, values and actual behaviour rather than discussion of idealised cultural and religious norms that should underpin relationships. For further information on the Focus Group Discussions and participants, see pages 17-18 of the report.

This project adhered to the ethical research principles of Australian Red Cross. The aims and objectives of the community consultation project were explained at the start of each focus group and participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions. Written consent was given by all participants as was the permission for notes to be taken during the focus groups and for the discussion to be recorded on a digital device. The consultant explained to all participants that the purpose of the recording was to ensure an accurate record of the discussion and that this would only be listened to by the consultant before being destroyed. As participants may have experienced or be at risk of forced marriage, they were given the option of taking a break from or leaving the discussion altogether if they felt distressed. Participants were also given an information sheet with name and contact details of appropriate support services and were assured that Red Cross would assist them to access these should they require. Focus group discussions only proceeded after these permissions and assurances were given.

The consultant facilitated each of the focus group discussions and two Red Cross staff – the Manager of the Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building Project and a note taker attended each focus group. All three took notes of the discussion and there were then read three times and analysed using a grounded approach that identified key themes by the consultant.

An informal, friendly rapport was established in each focus group to make participants feel as relaxed and welcomed as possible. Food was provided at each group as they were held over lunch or after hours in the evening. Sharing food was a great way to build rapport before the focus group discussion started and to continue discussions after they finished. Most focus group discussions were held in Red Cross office as this was identified by the community liaisons as a neutral and convenient space for participants to access.

Interpreters assisted with communication in three focus group discussions. All participants were given a gift voucher to thank them for their participation.

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<sup>19</sup> Community Liaisons working with ARC's Victorian Forced Marriage Capacity Building Project (2017- 2019).

## Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussions – Example Agendas

### COMMUNITY LIAISONS

#### AGENDA

**Saturday – 13 January 2018**

**9:30 – 1:30pm**

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 09.30 – 09.45 | Welcome and introduction<br>Aims and objectives of the community research process<br>Role of the Advisory Committee<br>Outcomes |
| 9.50 – 10.10  | Research ethics and informed consent  |
| 10.10 – 10.20 | Warm up activity: Know your ‘why’   |
| 10.20 – 11.00 | Story telling   |
| 11.00 – 11.30 | Story analysis: Identification of protective and risk factors   |
| 11.30 – 11.40 | BREAK: Morning tea  |
| 11.40 – 12.00 | Question café   |
| 12.00 – 12.30 | Craft your own message  |
| 12.30 – 12.45 | Planning your focus group discussion  |
| 12.45 – 01.00 | Wrap up and next steps  |

### MARRIED MEN AND WOMEN

**AGENDA, Sunday – 21 January 2018, 1:00 – 3:00pm**

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1.00 – 1.10 | Welcome and introduction<br>Aims and objectives of the community research process<br>Outcomes   |
| 1.10 – 1.20 | Consent   |
| 1.20 – 1.40 | Warm up activity: Why were you interested in joining today’s discussion?<br><br>What keeps families strong, healthy and respectful?<br>What keeps relationships between husband and wife strong, healthy and respectful?<br>Relationships between parents and their children / daughters?<br>Relationships between siblings?<br>Relationships between family and community?<br>All families have their ups and downs but some families stay together and strong.<br>What signs tell us that families are not managing to stay strong and work together, get divorced? |

- What might cause divorce?
- What contributes to break down in relationships?
- Does the situation/ circumstances in which the marriage took place make a difference?
- In what circumstances do forced marriages take place?
- How do communities respond to divorce /separation/forced marriage?
- 1.40 – 2.20 Story telling: protective factors
- 2.20 – 2.40 Story analysis: Identification of protective and risk factors
- 2.40 – 3.00 Community responses

## YOUNG AFGHAN WOMEN

### AGENDA, Thursday – 25 January 2018, 6:00 – 8:30pm

- 6.00 Dinner
- 6.15 Welcome and introduction to the project
- 6.20 Ethics and consent
- 6.25 – 6.55 What keeps families strong, healthy and respectful?  
Break up into pairs and each pair to discuss one of the following:
  - What keeps relationships between husband and wife strong, healthy and respectful? between parents and children?
  - between siblings?
  - with grandparents, uncles, aunts and extended family?
  - between family and community?

Discuss points raised amongst whole group  
Draw out protective factors for each relationship
- 6.55 All families have their ups and downs but some families stay together and strong.
  - What causes relationships breakdown?
  - What might some of the consequences be?
- 7.15 What pushes a family to enter their daughter into an early and forced marriage?
  - Why do you think forced marriage is happening?
  - What factors push this?
- 7.30 – 8.20 Sara is a 16 year old girl who is experiencing these push factors, what could she do in this situation?
  - What might be happening in her family? What could she do?
  - What is the community expecting from the family and from the Sara?
  - What support does Sara need to be understood/for her voice to be heard and respected?
- 8.20 – 8.30 Share information sheet



Forced Marriage:  
Community Voices, Stories and Strategies  
Consultation with community