

Acknowledgement: This document was written by an Afghan refugee woman of Islamic background who sits as a Youth Advisor on the NAPCAN Youth Speak Out Council. Below is a set of recommendations from this perspective.

Overview of Recommendations:

1. Early Prevention Education:

1.1 Early prevention education and innovative approaches tailored to the diverse cultural needs can play a crucial role in reducing the occurrence of forced marriages. Education can explore the concept of consent through an intersectional lens in depth and emphasise its importance, particularly in a country like Australia.

2. Education Opportunities:

2.1 Expanding opportunities for women and girls to receive quality education, empower them with knowledge of their rights, and ensure they are informed about available support resources.

2.2 Expanding intergenerational community education to empower all women to feel supported and confident in standing up against toxic relationships.

2.3 Training of counsellors and educators to recognise the signs of forced marriage.

3. Resource Development

3.1 Creating resources to be designed to raise awareness about specialised educational programs, culturally sensitive counselling services, and accessible legal assistance.

4. Further Research

4.1 A call for the Australian Government to invest further research and resources into determining what is stopping culturally and linguistically diverse communities from reporting.

Evidence Base:

In 2024, forced marriage remains a critical issue in Australia.¹ Although the data for the 2023/24 financial year has not yet been released, 340 offences were reported during the 2022/23 financial year.² Whilst there is strong legislation that criminalises forced marriage, there are strong indicators that suggest this practice is deeply rooted in cultural, social, economic factors

¹ Jennifer Burn, *Why prevention is the best way to address forced marriage in Australia*, (WEB page, 2022) <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/jennifer-burn-preventing-forced-marriage-in-australia/13977466>>

² Australian Federal Policy, *School communities called on to identify the signs of forced marriage*, (Web page, 2024) <<https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/school-communities-called-identify-signs-forced-marriage>>

that especially affect young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds. The notion of preserving honour, is often closely tied to these practices. This concept emphasises the importance of cultural groups to maintain the reputation, dignity, and social standing of a family and community, and has resulted in women and girls being controlled. Beyond the preservation of safeguarding honour, is the practice of preserving the family's status and social class. The interconnectedness of violence against women and children, as well as forced marriage, are closely connected within migrant and refugee communities.

As forced marriage can take place in Australia, in the victim's or spouse's country of origin, or in an entirely different country, there must be a greater emphasis on the subsequent responses of forced marriage. This includes but is not limited to, loss of education, gender-based violence, honour killings, and human trafficking.³

Recommendation One: Early Prevention Education

In implementing education for young women and girls, this information can raise awareness amongst young women about the legal implications of forced marriage, as well as their own personal rights. The integration of this information within school curriculums can aid young girls to understand their rights. This education plays a pivotal role in breaking multiple cycles of abuse, and enables young women to build their agency, confidence, and independence. This should also involve addressing and dismantling the narrative within many migrant communities that frames children and their parents as being strictly in a victim-perpetrator binary. This binary overlooks the nuance that gender-based violence also occurs for individuals, who may also be labelled as perpetrators.

Whilst the Australian Government has committed to The Forced Marriage Specialist Support Program to be launched in 2025, with the intention of providing early intervention support to those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing forced marriage, there is limited public knowledge and research that highlights how this program is cultivating a culturally safe community for young women. Specialist services must adequately address the intersectionality of forced marriage, and this program does not yet highlight how it will do this.

Recommendation Two: Education Opportunities

Schools are imperative environments to recognising the signs of forced marriage, and can provide appropriate intervention before potential cases can escalate. The integration of early prevention education for counsellors and educators, particularly in schools that have a high demographic of migrant and refugee students, can ensure the signs of forced marriage are picked up. This training should include understanding the cultural dynamics at play, recognising the signs of forced marriage, and providing support in a manner that respects the individual's cultural background.

³ FECCA, *Forced Marriages in Australia - A Literature Review*, (Web page, 2019)
<<https://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/FECCA-Literature-Review-on-Forced-Marriages.pdf>>

Recommendation Three: Resource Development

The creation of culturally tailored education material is needed to reflect the values, norms, and practices, of specific communities, whilst simultaneously addressing the issue of forced marriage. These resources should address issues including forced marriage, legal rights, support services available, consent and healthy relationships. NAPCAN recommends establishing these resources with community leaders and cultural organisations through a rigorous consultation process to ensure the resources resonate in a respectful and relevant manner, with the community.

Recommendation Four: Further Research

The investment of further resources is required to understand the barriers that prevent culturally and linguistically diverse communities from reporting instances of forced marriage. Literature consistently highlights the challenges young women face in reporting gender-based violence, a fear that is significantly amplified by the potential risks of encountering further violence including becoming victims of honour killings, and being subjected to human trafficking. In implementing further research, a community consultation should be conducted to focus on improving access to reporting mechanisms, establishing a culturally sensitive approach, and enhancing trust and support within the community. This culturally sensitive approach is especially important, as research has demonstrated that young people are looking for support, and not the criminalisation of punishment of their parents.⁴

Conclusion

In Australia, forced marriage remains a silent issue, particularly amongst migrant and refugee communities. This silence is fuelled by cultural, social, and economic pressures, making it difficult for those affected to seek help or speak out. The recommendations above, provide a multi-faceted approach in recognising each priority needed to address forced marriage in a culturally sensitive manner, that promoted prevention education. These recommendations must be advised by lived experience, to ensure a forced marriage is addressed amongst at-risk communities.

⁴ Kate Fiz-Gibbon, Young Women Impacted by Forced Marriage in Australia: An Examination of Marriage, Gender, and Harm. <Web page, 2023>
https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/thesis/Young_women_impacted_by_forced_marriage_in_Australia_an_examination_of_marriage_gender_and_harm/22682224/1?file=40268116