

Forced Marriage in Australia:

Building a Social Response
with Frontline Workers

Speak Now



Authors: Jacqueline Nelson and Jennifer Burn

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There is a need for a social safety net for those experiencing pressure to marry or who are already in a forced marriage. Under Australian law, a forced marriage is considered to have occurred when one or both parties to the marriage have not freely consented. Responses to forced marriage in Australia over the past 15 years have largely centred on criminal law, with less emphasis on broader survivor and community led prevention work (Simmons and Wong, 2021).

We define a social response to forced marriage as the wide-ranging supports, services and educational activities that work to prevent, respond and support those affected by forced marriage. A social response involves individuals, families, communities, and government and non-government organisations.

A social response to forced marriage requires recognition of the social drivers that need to be addressed. Situating forced marriage as a form of gender-based violence, or as family and domestic violence (FDV), is useful for highlighting its social drivers.

Forced marriage has strong potential to be positioned as a racialised practice, depicted as a cultural 'issue' associated with particular (racial) groups (see, for example, Prattis et al., 2019). Assumptions are made about who 'perpetrates' forced marriage and why they do it. Given the well-established and significant harm of racism (see, for example, Abdel-Fattah, R., 2018; Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson, 2016; Paradies et al., 2015) this must be a central consideration in forced marriage responses. The social response to forced marriage must not further stigmatise racial or religious communities that are already subject to high levels of racism and surveillance.

There is limited published research on effective social responses to forced marriage. The elements of an effective social response we identify in this research reflect the views of the informants we spoke to – frontline workers. Other elements will emerge from engagement with different groups, and we recognise that survivors of forced marriage and affected communities should be front and centre in building this picture. Our focus in this research was on frontline workers, who play an important role within a social response.

The term forced marriage has a specific legal meaning, but outside of the legal and policy context, other language should be considered, to better capture the continuum of coercion that occurs and that is meaningful for those affected.

The Role of Frontline Workers in a Social Response

The drivers and impacts of forced marriage are multi-faceted, thus an effective social response will involve a range of activity across multiple levels, from structural and institutional interventions (e.g. to Australia's asylum and migration regimes), to community-based programs (e.g. education, settlement support for families, parenting initiatives), down to individual responses (e.g. provision of crisis and longer-term support). A rigorous social response encompasses prevention activity well before marriage, right through to crisis and recovery support. Frontline workers serve as a key point of intersection between those affected by forced marriage and the systems that both govern and seek to support them.

Survivors of forced marriage have indicated that good support from frontline workers helped them to avoid a marriage, assisted them to leave, helped them undertake safety planning or to understand their options (Simmons and Wong, 2021). Equipping frontline workers to identify that someone is experiencing pressure to marry, and provide support, may make it more likely that a marriage can be avoided or delayed. Regardless of the ultimate outcome, appropriate support from a frontline worker may simply reduce the feeling of isolation that someone being pressured to marry, or already in a forced marriage, can experience.

The support frontline workers can provide to someone affected by forced marriage varies widely, and is driven by factors like the workers' professional role, their cultural understanding, and a person's citizenship or visa status. Many of the most pressing needs of those affected are basic survival requirements – safe and stable accommodation, financial support, psychological assistance and so on – and frontline workers are led by their clients in identifying needs.

Our Approach

In November 2021 we conducted eight focus group discussions with a total of 53 participants. The focus groups were sector based, and attended by frontline workers from health; youth work; education (secondary and tertiary); family and domestic violence; migrant, refugee and settlement services; and faith communities. Focus groups ran for approximately 1.5 hours.

Frontline Workers Perspectives on the Social Response

a. Working in client-led relationships

We found that an effective social response relies on strong relationship development between frontline workers and those affected by forced marriage. Focus group participants emphasised that support for someone happens *in relationship*, and indicated the significance of relationship development to allow them to work effectively.

Trust is critical in enabling frontline workers to support those in or at risk of forced marriage.

I think that with disclosures about any of this sort of stuff, a lot of the time... it's a test... to see if I'm going to be believed, I'm going to be supported, I'm going to be assisted. And if that's shut down at the first step, I mean... we're gonna miss a lot more.

(Secondary schools FGD)

Resourcing of frontline workers to facilitate relationship development is critical. Training for frontline workers around identifying a disclosure, and responding appropriately when 'tested' is also likely to be important. The caution with which those affected by forced marriage approach disclosure, and their sensitivity to the response, accords with Simmons and Wong's (2021) observation that survivors were highly attuned to the response they received from the first frontline official they disclosed to.

Many of the frontline workers we spoke to recognised that being client-led was essential, even if this was personally challenging at times.

I think the way that service providers and clinicians... see risk for woman could be very different to the way that... they see for themselves. So for example, for this particular woman... safety for herself may not be as up there as the safety of her unborn child, and what kind of life this child may have, if she were to leave the situation... So I think sometimes it's even hearing that perspective from the client about, you know what it is that worries them the most...

(F&DV FGD)

Client-led support for people involves listening as those affected navigate multiple, intersecting issues in their lives, including pressure to marry. Being genuinely client-led should also prompt frontline workers to see individuals and their circumstances holistically. As a result, working in relationship with those experiencing pressure to marry may illuminate the social and structural drivers of forced marriage, and disrupt the view that forced marriage is a cultural practice (Gangoli and Chantler, 2009; Prattis et al., 2019).

b. Framing and Language

While the language of forced marriage is used in the legal definitions, as well as by some frontline workers and policy makers, other frontline workers find that “the communities that we’re working with don’t have the same language around these things” (Migrant and Multicultural FGD). The term forced marriage has a specific legal meaning, but outside of the legal and policy context, other language should be considered, to better capture the continuum of coercion that occurs and that is meaningful for those affected.

Effective frontline support, according to our participants, is often best provided without the label of forced marriage. Some participants found the term forced marriage to be stigmatising, and associated with particular racial and religious groups, as was found in previous research on media reporting on this issue in Australia (Patton, 2018).

Sensitively navigating language and labels is a trained skill in particular sectors, but may be less practiced in others, such as in mainstream health provisions (e.g. GPs and emergency doctors).

...We tend to approach questions through labelling, which doesn't actually lead to helping the person feel safe and comfortable to speak openly.

(Health FGD)

This participant highlighted that the development of trauma informed and culturally appropriate screening tools is a highly specialised task. Careful design of questions and information gathering tools is needed to elicit meaningful responses, and highlights the import of survivor centred design of assessment processes.

Framings of this issue must bear in mind the variation in decision making processes around marriage, which may not only include the marrying individuals, but also families coming together to make collective decisions (Prattis et al., 2019; Shariff, 2012; Wilson, 2007; Zeweri and Shinkfield, 2021). Frontline workers are encouraged to approach conversations with those affected by marriage pressures with an openness to listen and to learn more about the individual’s personal values and goals, and their cultural and familial context. Building capacity of frontline workers should include building understanding that those impacted by marriage pressures will describe and understand their experience in diverse ways.

c. Australia's migration and asylum-seeking system

Forced marriage concerns come from people of all residency statuses, including Australian citizens and residents, as well as people on temporary visas. Our focus group participants working with temporary visa holders note that the visa regime in Australia, and associated beliefs about the system, prevents or delays people from seeking support. Participants reported that misinformation about Australian visas is rife, and also that those holding partner visas can be particularly fearful of losing their visas.


Australia's migration and asylum-seeking system intersects with the ability of frontline workers to identify and support those in or at risk of forced marriage. Pressure to marry can be driven by a desire for extended family and community to reach safety in Australia (Simmons and Wong, 2021; Zeweri, 2022). The fear of deportation can serve as a barrier to disclosure, delaying or preventing those affected by forced marriage from accessing support, and may reflect a lack of accurate information about visa options. Focus group participants observed that the fear and uncertainty of temporary visa holders can affect their ability to establish effective, supportive and trusting relationships with service providers.

d. Resourcing of frontline workers and key sectors

A strong social response to forced marriage depends on adequate resourcing of key sectors, including health, educational and social services. Time and workload issues were identified as barriers to identification and support, with many organisations and sectors reported to be under-resourced. Identifying when someone is affected by forced marriage can be time consuming and complex. Getting help for people within these situations "involves quite extensive advocacy support, to kind of get anywhere" (Universities FGD).

Within the health sector, time and workload were key barriers to identification and support. A health worker reflected that it "takes a lot of time to explain... laws around what people's rights are, and that there are supports" (Health FGD). The presence of a partner, parent or child can also be a barrier to identifying family violence, including forced marriage. While the time investment involved in supporting someone was seen as considerable, a person can also decide at any time to withdraw from the process (Youth Work FGD).

Compounding time and workload issues, supporting people affected can be a long process. Forced marriage is best understood as a process that occurs over time rather than a discrete incident (Chantler and McCarry, 2020), and support needs reflect this. The pressure does not typically disappear, even if someone navigates their way around a particular incident or risk. Yet the longevity of support needed is not compatible with support systems designed to deal most effectively with people in moments of crisis. A participant working in FDV observed that they were well equipped to assist with visa issues, accommodation, managing "the sort of crisis side of it, but what happens after that, and the shame?".



The social response to forced marriage necessarily engages individuals, families and communities. Social factors – such as prescriptive beliefs about gender, experiences of trauma, displacement, exclusion and so on – often drive forced marriage and therefore social responses need to address these drivers across communities. A social response to forced marriage recognises wide ranging marriage decision making practices and family dynamics. Importantly, an effective social response avoids stigmatising particular racial and religious groups. In this research we hope we have prompted consideration of what constitutes an effective social response to forced marriage.

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