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## Study reveals truths and myths about forced marriage to increase safety for women

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The Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC) has led a project in partnership with the Ending Violence Association of BC (EVA BC), funded by the Department of Justice which has uncovered strong findings on the myths surrounding forced marriage to guide work that will increase safety for women

and girls.

Forced marriage is a form of violence where individuals are forced to marry without their full, free and informed consent. The objective of this two-year project, Enhancing Community Capacity To Respond To And Prevent Forced Marriage, is to better assist individuals in, or at risk of, forced marriage.

Research conducted in the first year of the project, with almost 100 research participants, has revealed four key findings:

- (1) forced marriage is not confined to a single culture,
- (2) service provision is inadequate,
- (3) the prevalence of forced marriage hinges on the oppression of women worldwide, and
- (4) the term “forced marriage” itself may be a barrier to help-seeking.

These research findings will inform the project’s risk assessment framework which will provide community service providers with a guide to better assist victims of forced marriage. Having knowledgeable service providers will greatly increase the chance that victims will get the assistance they need.

In addition to the overall coordination, MOSAIC has conducted focus groups and developed a website – [endforcedmarriages.ca](http://endforcedmarriages.ca), to serve as a platform which will disseminate information to service providers, potential victims and the community at large. The focus groups were conducted with men and women from a diverse range of ethno-cultural communities. In total, there were 40 focus group members from 13 different countries within Asia, Africa, North and South America. All participants either had experienced forced marriage or had intimate knowledge of forced marriage cases. The diverse range of individuals knowledgeable about instances of forced marriage demonstrates that it can happen to anyone irrespective of gender, age, race, culture, or religion.

EVA BC has completed a literature review, an online survey of service providers from across BC, key-informant interviews with expert stakeholders, and a draft of the framework which will be piloted and finalized by MOSAIC for dispersal to service providers in early 2016. The need for this project is highlighted in the responses to the online survey of community service providers.

According to service providers, there is a lack of services, knowledge and capacity to serve those in or at risk of forced marriage. The survey reveals that of 53 respondents, 50% do not have agency or program guidelines, policies or best practices to help guide their work in cases where forced marriage is suspected. The exigency for informed service provision is underscored by the fact that 43% of service providers indicated they or a colleague had provided assistance to clients of suspected or known forced marriage. Forty percent assisted anywhere from one to five clients who have been impacted by forced marriage in the last three years.

The project is particularly significant as Bill S-7, with legislation relating to forced marriage, has just recently received royal assent. Portions of the bill dealing with age of consent to marriage are now in force, while other sections of the bill which amend the Criminal Code will become law shortly. It is imperative that further research on forced marriage continues as the impact of these changes on the safety of forced marriage victims is unknown. Prior to this joint project by MOSAIC and EVA BC, there was only one previous study available in Canada on this topic.

Our study finds that women and girls are the predominant victims of forced marriage. Statements from research participants indicated an overwhelming consensus that forced marriage is the result of gender inequality around the world. Patriarchy is at the root of the issue, where a woman's power in society and right to choose are subordinate to that of men. An early recommendation will encourage stakeholders and community service providers to position forced marriage within this framework, as a symptom of patriarchal control, not a core tradition of any particular culture or religion.

The project also finds that the term "forced marriage" lacked clarity for many research participants. The term did not have an equivalent in the other languages represented in the study. The gap in terminology alongside fears associated with help-seeking (stigma, further violence and the prosecution of family members) make it difficult for victims to overtly disclose their experience of forced marriage. It is essential that service providers have the knowledge to identify instances of forced marriage in this environment.

The framework and resources developed will increase awareness in the community, and educate service providers through a risk assessment framework. Increasing awareness involves dispelling the myths that forced marriage is a phenomenon limited to only a few cultural communities, and that it can be prevented without investigating the systemic subordination of women that occurs worldwide. This project addresses immediate concerns of forced marriage by providing service providers with the competency to assist victims while also drawing attention to the larger systemic barriers which put women at risk for violence. Our goal is to contribute to an environment which will inhibit forced marriage and ultimately violence against women and girls.

More information about the project can be found at [endforcedmarriages.ca](http://endforcedmarriages.ca).

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