# Forced Marriage and Family Relationships

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## Abstract

Forced marriage was criminalised in Australia in 2013 and is considered a form of modern slavery and, less consistently, of family violence. Reports to date indicate that family members, particularly parents, are commonly responsible for coercing their children into marriage. Within a criminal framework, families are perpetrators, but this framing obscures complex family relationships, and the love, mutual care, and sense of duty that is often present within families affected. We interviewed eight women with experience of forced marriage and explored the histories of families as well as communication practices within families where coercion into marriage takes place. We reflect on what happens after an experience of coercion to marry, discussing both the resilience of the women as well as the reconfiguration of familial relationships that occurs when decision-making about marriage takes place. Interviews showed that ties between parents and their adult children can be enduring, even when difficult and requiring significant effort.

**Keywords:** forced marriage, family relationships, family and domestic violence, modern slavery, conflict work

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## Introduction

This article explores experiences and histories, communication practices and relationships within families where forced marriage takes place. Forced marriage was criminalised in Australia in 2013 and is considered a form of modern slavery and, less consistently, of family violence. Within Australian law, a forced marriage is defined as one that occurs without the free and full consent of both parties.[1] Consent is critical within the legal definition, with an absence of consent from either party involved being a key characteristic of forced marriage.[2] Simmons and Burn[3] argue that forced marriage exists on a continuum of coercive practices, and where a case might fall on this continuum depends on numerous factors that affect an individual's ability to fully and freely consent to marriage. While forced marriage is the term used in the legal definition and policy discussions, alternatives such as pressure to marry[4] and coercion into marriage[5] have also been used to describe behaviour that impacts an individual's ability to freely consent to a marriage. We use the term 'forced marriage', but also pressure to marry or coercion into marriage, as this language captures the continuum of coercion that is experienced by those affected[6] and better reflects the way those with lived experience describe it.[7]

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1 Under Australian law, a forced marriage is defined as one that occurs without the free and full consent of one or both parties because they have been coerced, threatened, or deceived; because they were incapable of understanding the nature and effect of the marriage ceremony; or because they were under the age of 16 years and are presumed not to have consented to the marriage. (*Criminal Code Act* 1995, section 270.7A).

2 In Australia, a marriage will be invalid if the consent of either of the parties is not a real consent because it was obtained by duress or fraud (*Marriage Act* 1961, sections 88D(2)(d) & 23B (1)(d)).

3 F Simmons and J Burn, 'Without Consent: Forced Marriage in Australia', *Melbourne University Law Review*, vol. 36, issue 3, 2013, pp. 970–1008.

4 J Nelson and J Burn, 'Forced Marriage in Australia: Building a Social Response with Frontline Workers', *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 34, issue 1, 2024, pp. 89–109, https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639241242125.

5 H Zeweri, *Between Care and Criminality: Marriage, Citizenship, and Family in Australian Social Welfare*, 1st Edition, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2023.

6 Simmons and Burn.

7 K Chantler, G Gangoli, and M Hester, 'Forced Marriage in the UK: Religious, Cultural, Economic or State Violence?', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 29, issue 4, 2009, pp. 587–612, https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018309341905; C Villacampa and N Torres, 'Forced Marriage: What Do Professionals Know?', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, vol. 67, 2021, p. 100506, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2021.100506.

This article emerges out of our work on Speak Now, an Australian forced marriage prevention project. Forced marriage most commonly affects young women but can be experienced by people of any age, gender, religion or cultural group.[8] Family members are typically responsible for coercion into marriage, but family relationships themselves have seldom been studied as a focal point. This article seeks to build the knowledge base of coercion into marriage by focused study of family relationships and forced marriage. The aims of this article are (1) to explore histories and experiences of families affected by forced marriage; (2) to develop greater understanding of communication and decision-making practices within families affected by this issue; and (3) to highlight individual and, sometimes, familial resilience, when navigating decision-making about marriage. In doing so, we draw on a thematic analysis of interviews with eight women who were in or at risk of forced marriages. In our conclusion, we reflect on the implications of our observations for forced marriage policy and practice responses.

## Forced Marriage, Families, and Conflict: Key concepts and literature

*Background to the Issue of Forced Marriage and the Response in Australia*

Forced marriage in Australia is considered a form of modern slavery and is included in criminal law as a 'slavery-like offence'.[9] There is debate within academic literature and policy discussions around the framing of forced marriage. For example, writing in the UK, McCabe and Eglen argue that forced marriage can itself be considered modern slavery, and that a forced marriage can lead those affected into a situation that may constitute modern slavery, but also note that survivors' experiences within forced marriages indicate that 'not *every* forced marriage is, or becomes, a form of modern slavery'.[10] Others advocate that forced marriage is more productively viewed as 'a specific manifestation of the

8 S Lyneham and S Bricknell, *When Saying No Is Not an Option: Forced Marriage in Australia and New Zealand*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2018.

9 *Criminal Code Act* 1995 (Cth), sections 270.7B (Forced marriage offences); S J Tan and L Vidal, *Forced Marriage as a Form of Family Violence in Victoria*, Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, 2023.

10 H McCabe and L Eglen, "'I Bought You. You Are My Wife": "Modern Slavery" and Forced Marriage', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2022, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2022.2096366, p. 2, emphasis in original.

wider problem of gendered and patriarchal violence'.[11] These discussions were reflected in a July 2024 national consultation in Australia on civil protections for those affected by forced marriage, which sought to gather views on recognition of forced marriage as a form of family and domestic violence.[12]

The initial policy response to forced marriage in Australia was primarily concerned with legal reform, including criminalisation of the practice. We have argued elsewhere that there is a need for a stronger *social* response that engages with the social drivers of forced marriage,[13] such as gendered violence[14] and Australia's migration system, where intense border control policies may render marriage one of few available migration pathways into Australia.[15] Within a criminal framework, families are most often seen as perpetrators, but this framing obscures complex family relationships, and the love, mutual care, and sense of duty that is often present within families affected.[16] In this article, we move away from the view of families as perpetrators. Like others,[17] we see the victim–perpetrator binary—which characterises young people experiencing coercion as victims, and their parents, siblings, extended family members, etc. as perpetrators—as reductive and argue that there is value in increasing understanding of family dynamics, experiences, and histories.

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11 See, for example, S Anitha and A Gill, 'Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK', *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2009, pp. 165–84, p. 48, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-009-9119-4; C Patton, 'Racialising Domestic Violence: Islamophobia and the Australian Forced Marriage Debate', *Race & Class*, vol. 60, issue 2, 2018, pp. 21–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818792182.

12 Attorney General's Department, *Enhancing Civil Protections and Remedies for Forced Marriage*, Canberra, ACT, 2024.

13 Nelson and Burn; see also F Simmons and G Wong, 'Learning from Lived Experience: Australia's Legal Response to Forced Marriage', *The University of New South Wales Law Journal*, vol. 44, issue 4, 2021, pp. 1619–1662, https://doi.org/10.53637/YJYS9724.

14 See M Segrave and S Vasil, *The Borders of Violence: Temporary Migration and Domestic and Family Violence (Edition 1)*, Taylor & Francis, Oxford, 2025, p. 119.

15 H Zeweri and S Shinkfield, 'Centring Migrant Community Voices in Forced Marriage Prevention Social Policy: A Proposed Reframing', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 56, issue 3, 2021, pp. 427–442, https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.153.

16 C Villacampa, 'Forced Marriage as a Lived Experience: Victims' Voices', *International Review of Victimology*, vol. 26, issue 3, 2020, pp. 344–367, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758019897145.

17 For example, Tan and Vidal; Zeweri.

Support for those affected by forced marriage has largely been designed in a way that is individually oriented. There is growing recognition, however, that both prevention of and responses to forced marriage will benefit from an approach that closely attends to family contexts. Historically, the use of family mediation in forced marriage cases has been a divisive issue in the United Kingdom in particular,[18] with those who oppose mediation concerned about the possibility of further harm for those being coerced to marry. However, the possibilities for carefully managed family mediation for particular low-risk families are now being considered in the Australian context. For example, in response to advocacy from support services, the Forced Marriage Specialist Support Program,[19] which commenced on 1 January 2025, will broaden support frameworks, including considering the role of family mediation. Good Shepherd Australia was funded to undertake a pilot family mediation programme through the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery 2020–2025, based on the Danish model developed by Farwha Nielsen.[20] Those with lived experience of forced marriage are deeply embedded within families and communities, and they often strongly value these connections.[21] In the Australian Red Cross' *Community Voices* report,[22] communities affected by forced marriage advocated for the provision of whole family support. The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights recommended that strengths-based parenting programmes that engage with decision-making around marriage be provided as a preventative activity.[23]

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18 Documented in C Dauvergne and J Millbank, 'Forced Marriage as a Harm in Domestic and International Law', *The Modern Law Review*, vol. 73, issue 1, 2010, pp. 57–88, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2230.2009.00784.x; A Gill and T Mitra-Kahn, 'Modernising the Other: Assessing the Ideological Underpinnings of the Policy Discourse on Forced Marriage in the UK', *Policy & Politics*, vol. 40, issue 1, 2012, pp. 107–122, https://doi.org/10.1332/147084411X581763.

19 Australian Government Department of Social Services, 'New Supports for Victim-Survivors of Modern-Day Slavery in Australia', 3 December 2023, https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/13356.

20 See L Vidal, 'The Art of Helping: Lessons for Australia in Taking a Mediation Approach to Forced Marriage', *The Power to Persuade*, 19 March 2019, https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/the-art-of-helping-lessons-for-australia-in-taking-a-mediation-approach-to-forced-marriage/18/3/2019, for discussion of the approach.

21 Villacampa.

22 Australian Red Cross, *Forced Marriage: Community Voices, Stories and Strategies*, 2019.

23 G Prattis and J El Matrah, *Marrying Young: An Exploration of Muslim Women's Decision Making around Early Marriage*, Australian Muslim Women's Centre on Human Rights, 2019.

*Families and Decisions about Marriage*

Decisions about marriage are always made within particular social contexts. Women's agency in regards to marriage has always operated within structural constraints, such as social norms, financial need, and pregnancy.[24] Supporting those affected by coercion into marriage requires sensitivity to both the cultural specificity of the issue and the universality of this form of gender violence; 'all women located within a matrix of structural inequalities can face social expectations, pressure and constraint in matters of marriage'.[25]

Decision-making practices differ amongst (and within) families, from individually oriented to more collective practices. Smart and Shipman make an important distinction between individual choice, where individuals are solely responsible for making decisions, and relational choice, whereby one attends to the views and needs of others. The degree to which marriage decision-making invokes individual and relational choice varies widely. Smart and Shipman observe:

> *…for many people getting married may actually be partly or primarily about forging alliances between kin, or the outcome of negotiations between competing interests of family members.*[26]

Within the UK context, Shariff observes that marital decision-making amongst many young British Asians is characterised by consensus, rather than consent.[27] Shariff cautions that while consensus provides space for negotiation within families, it can also be a means to shore up existing power structures within families. Analyses of pressure to marry should attend to the power dynamics within families and motivations of different family members. Shariff sees 'the heavily individualist model of consent inherent in the debate in the West'[28] as markedly different to the marriage process within South Asian communities in the United Kingdom, where marital decision-making is seen as a familial responsibility. Kaur, in work on families in India, notes the discursive importance of *duty* as

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24 S Anitha and A Gill, 'Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK', *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2009, pp. 65–184, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-009-9119-4.

25 Patton, p. 23.

26 C Smart and B Shipman, 'Visions in Monochrome: Families, Marriage and the Individualization Thesis', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, issue 4, 2004, pp. 491–509, p. 495, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00034.x.

27 F Shariff, 'Towards a Transformative Paradigm in the UK Response to Forced Marriage: Excavating Community Engagement and Subjectivising Agency', *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2012, pp. 549–565, https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663912453848.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 557.

a binding force within Indian families and the network of mutual obligations between family members.[29]

Familial involvement in decision-making about marriage is similarly a feature within some Australian families. Zeweri and Shinkfield see the negotiations that occur around marriage as potentially transformative of familial relations, even in the presence of very real social pressures.[30] According to Morgan, families are constituted and reconstituted through the ways they both create and respond to problems.[31]

Some families affected by forced marriage have migrated to or sought asylum in Australia.[32] Family dynamics shift and change markedly post-settlement. Individual experiences differ post-migration, depending on people's age, gender, and position within their family; family structures; and other such factors. Remaking family life following migration or seeking asylum can be challenging for all members of a family. Research more commonly explores the experiences of young people, while the perspectives and challenges for parents can be overlooked.[33] The interculturation gap, whereby young people adapt more rapidly to a cultural transition than their parents or older family members, can create significant tension within families.[34] This can occur within families who may already face challenges,

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29 R Kaur, 'Family Matters in India: A Sociological Understanding', in P N Mukherji, N Jayaram, and B N Ghosh (eds.), *Understanding Social Dynamics in South Asia: Essays in Memory of Ramkrishna Mukherjee*, Springer, Singapore, 2019, pp. 147–159.

30 Zeweri and Shinkfield.

31 D H J Morgan, 'Family Troubles, Troubling Families, and Family Practices', *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 40, issue 16, 2019, pp. 2225–2238, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19848799.

32 Lyncham and Bricknell; Zeweri and Shinkfield.

33 K Lewig, F Arney, and M Salveron, 'Challenges to Parenting in a New Culture: Implications for Child and Family Welfare', *Child Welfare and the Challenge of the New Americans*, vol. 33, issue 3, 2010, pp. 324–332, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2009.05.002; A M N Renzaho, N Dhingra, and N Georgeou, 'Youth as Contested Sites of Culture: The Intergenerational Acculturation Gap amongst New Migrant Communities—Parental and Young Adult Perspectives', *PLOS ONE*, vol. 12, issue 2, 2017, p. e0170700, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170700.

34 L C Koh, P Liamputtong, and R Walker, 'Burmese Refugee Young Women Navigating Parental Expectations and Resettlement', *Journal of Family Studies*, vol. 19, 2013, pp. 297–305, https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.2013.19.3.297; C McMichael, S M Gifford, and I Correa-Velez, 'Negotiating Family, Navigating Resettlement: Family Connectedness amongst Resettled Youth with Refugee Backgrounds Living in Melbourne, Australia', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 14, issue 2, 2011, pp. 179–195, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2010.506529.

such as dealing with displacement and trauma, experiences of racism, securing employment, and navigating a new language and environment. Individuals 'carry with them their own personal, biographical histories, as well as the social and cultural history of their lives', with young people moving forward with their parents' values and experiences, alongside and changed by their own.[35] The challenges or 'troubles' a family experiences during resettlement, and responses to these experiences, are constitutive of family relationships.[36]

*Family Work and Conflict Work*

Family work is a core sociological concept that captures the efforts made to maintain family life, originally motivated out of a desire, by feminists, to reframe duties carried out in the home as 'work'.[37] Erickson argued for including 'emotion work' within family work, referring to the energy put into supporting the emotional well-being of other family members.[38] Reczek and Bosley-Smith build further on the concept of family work,[39] observing the significant work that goes into maintaining parent and adult–child relationships when there is a serious conflict. They term this 'conflict work' and assert that the efforts to maintain family relationships when under strain is an important part of family work.

In their study with LGBTQ adults in the United States, Reczek and Bosley-Smith highlight the endurance of parent–child relationships even under very difficult circumstances—in their case, when a parent does not accept an adult child's sexual or gender identity.[40] They introduce the idea of compulsory kinship to conceptualise the intense social forces that bind parents and adult children

35 V L Bengtson, T J Biblarz, and R E L Roberts, *How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002, cited in Smart and Shipman, p. 502.

36 Morgan.

37 A K Daniels, 'Invisible Work', *Social Problems*, vol. 34, issue 5, 1987, pp. 403–415, https://doi.org/10.2307/800538.

38 R J Erickson, 'Reconceptualizing Family Work: The Effect of Emotion Work on Perceptions of Marital Quality', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 55, issue 4, 1993, pp. 888–900, https://doi.org/10.2307/352770.

39 R Reczek and E Bosley-Smith, *Families We Keep: LGBTQ People and Their Enduring Bonds with Parents*, New York University Press, New York, 2022; R Reczek and E Bosley-Smith, 'How LGBTQ Adults Maintain Ties with Rejecting Parents: Theorizing "Conflict Work" as Family Work', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 83, issue 4, 2021, pp. 1134–1153, https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12765.

40 Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

together. Their interviewees had three rationales for maintaining parent–child bonds, including 'love and closeness, parental growth, and parents as unique social ties'.[41] The endurance of family relationships in spite of intense conflict is relevant to our work on family relationships and forced marriage. Experiences of duress within these relationships can transform familial and social relations.[42]

While family relationships have not yet been a core focus, existing Australian literature touches on family relationships in the context of forced marriage. Simmons and Wong reported that four of the seven participants in their study had had positive relationships with family members before they experienced coercion into marriage.[43] The other three indicated they had previously experienced family violence. Two participants reported that their family members had eventually acknowledged the harm caused by the forced marriage. There were varied outcomes for relationships with family after avoiding or leaving a forced marriage. Contact ranged from returning to live in the family home and living independently with some family contact to complete estrangement from family. Lyneham and Bricknell state that of the thirteen experiences of forced marriage they analysed, only one survivor re-established a full relationship with her family.[44] She described being able to restore her family honour through success in education and employment. Three women maintained a relationship with one parent, but there continued to be a risk of violence, coercion, or ostracism from the other parent. Most of the others affected by forced marriage lost contact with family when they left the forced marriage situation, with some participants indicating their families had completely ostracised them.

In this paper, we explore the utility of the concept of conflict work for understanding family relationships and forced marriage. In doing so, we observe the nature of conflict work amongst the women we interviewed. We also reflect on the costs that conflict work can have for young women who experienced coercion to marry.

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41 *Ibid*., p. 23.

42 Zeweri and Shinkfield.

43 Simmons and Wong.

44 Lyncham and Bricknell.

## Method

This article draws on eight interviews with women with lived experience of forced marriage, that is, they had previously been at risk of or in a forced marriage. Four of the women were forced to marry, two were engaged but not married, and two were able to avoid a forced marriage. Interviews were undertaken in 2023, with participants residing in three Australian states. Five of the interviews were conducted in English and three in community languages.[45] The former were undertaken by the first author; they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A research assistant undertook the interviews in community languages and provided detailed notes, with conversations translated into English.[46]

Recruiting people with lived experience of forced marriage was challenging. These challenges have been found in other studies with a similar number of participants.[47] Three participants were recruited through organisational contacts and five through the researchers' community and professional networks. Organisations who provided support for those with lived experience of forced marriage assisted with recruitment of three participants, using a flyer to share with potential interviewees. Prior to giving consent, all participants were provided with information about the research and what participation involved. Approximately half of those approached to participate either did not respond or declined to take part, citing a desire to move on and not revisit this difficult experience. Importantly, at least half of the young women we spoke to had not engaged in formal support when experiencing coercion into or leaving a forced marriage. This was a marked difference between our participants and those in previous studies, who were recruited through support organisations.[48] The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, and the interviewers gave participants scope to talk about their experiences in a manner and sequence that was most comfortable for them. Topics covered in the interviews included talking (1) about themselves, (2) their family, (3) family dynamics and decision-making, (4) pressure to marry, (5) support, (6) their current family relationships, and (7) support for families. Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and participants were

45 Participant locations and languages spoken are intentionally kept general, in order to protect the anonymity of interview participants.

46 For this reason, the excerpts provided from the translated interviews are not in quotation marks, as they are based on notes rather than a verbatim transcript. Interviews were conducted in accordance with approval from the human research ethics committee at the University of Technology Sydney.

47 M M Idriss, 'Key Agent and Survivor Recommendations for Intervention in Honour-Based Violence in the UK', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, vol. 42, issue 4, 2018, pp. 321–339, https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2017.1295394; Simmons and Wong; Villacampa.

48 Lyncham and Bricknell; Villacampa.

given a gift voucher to thank them for their involvement. Participants were given the opportunity to review any quotes that were used from their interviews and provide feedback; they were also invited to review this article in full.

All eight participants were women. Seven were raised in Muslim families, while one, Hanit,[49] was Hindu. Forced marriage occurs within families from a range of different religions. As we discuss in our findings, we need to bear in mind that our interviews were primarily with women who had been raised in Muslim families, and thus do not reflect the full breadth of experiences of coercion into marriage. While forced marriage largely affects women and girls, people of any gender can experience it,[50] so we also note that our findings relate specifically to women. One of the women was married as a child, another was engaged at 15 and married mid-way through her final year of school. For four participants, discussions about marriage commenced towards the end of high school, with the expectation to marry after finishing secondary schooling. The remaining two women were coerced to marry at 18 and 20, respectively.

Interview transcripts and notes from both sets of interviews were analysed thematically, with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo used to organise materials. A coding framework was developed to categorise interview transcripts and notes into main themes. This article draws on the themes around personal and family backgrounds, communication and decision-making, and family relationships.

## Research Findings

*Understanding the Histories and Experiences of Families*

Interview participants described challenges they, and their families, faced, including histories of migration, asylum-seeking, and resettlement, alongside experiences of trauma and violence. All eight participants were born outside Australia, with some arriving at a young age with their families, and others, such as Hanit, arriving independently as a young adult. The fathers of four participants had travelled to Australia by boat ahead of other family members to seek protection, and likely experienced Australia's punitive mandatory detention system, which has been in place since 1992.[51]

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[49] Pseudonyms used for all participants.

[50] Idriss.

[51] L Taylor, 'Designated Inhospitality: The Treatment of Asylum Seekers Who Arrive by Boat in Canada and Australia', *McGill Law Journal/Revue de Droit de McGill*, vol. 60, issue 2, 2015, pp. 333–379, https://doi.org/10.7202/1029211ar.

Most participants spoke about personal and family trauma, including experiences of childhood sexual abuse; mental health difficulties; loss; and sexual, family, and domestic violence. In this section, we provide three examples of the types of experiences that were raised within the interviews. Nabila explained that her parents' relationship went through periods of strain. She also described the effects of childhood sexual assault for her mum and the continued impacts of that trauma on Nabila's mum and family.

> *It's hard for any child to see that kind of breakdown in their parent's relationship... in our community mental health is so stigmatised, and we don't really talk about it. And it became really difficult, because both parents were dealing with mental health issues, and there's a lot of trauma there as well... My mum had experienced childhood sexual assault and... those issues were ongoing and are ongoing.*

Nabila talked about the stigma associated with mental health in her community. Research indicates that stigma can be a barrier to accessing mental health support,[52] and that family and faith leaders may be preferred sources of support.

Zahra described the cycle of trauma that occurred for her when her parents were forced into marriage at a young age, along with her father's own experiences of loss and trauma, and the way that this impacted on their parenting.

> *...my dad, he lost his father when he was nine years old. And he started working to support his whole family, his brothers, even their wives. And he had quite a hard life.*
>
> *We grow up in this collective culture where your family is your lifeline. They're so significant to you. I've been in situations with my dad where he nearly choked me to death. I had those really scary experiences. And I saw him abuse my mum. And that was really hard for me. But when I grew up, I started to have a different relationship with him. And I started to understand him more. Both of my parents, that's the kind of environment that they grow up in, it's like this cycle of you don't know how to parent because you are forced into a marriage at an extremely young age, you're a child learning how to deal with life. And obviously, you don't know how to deal with it. You do all these bad things, and then you continue that.*

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52 P W Corrigan, B G Druss, and D A Perlick, 'The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Seeking and Participating in Mental Health Care', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2014, pp. 37–70, https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100614531398; J Youssef and F P Deane, 'Factors Influencing Mental-Health Help-Seeking in Arabic-Speaking Communities in Sydney, Australia', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, vol. 9, issue 1, 2006, pp. 43–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670512331335686.

> *So that's why I'm really proud of the fact that I left, because I feel like I broke that cycle, at least for me and my children. If I have kids in the future.*

Zahra made observations about her parents' early lives, speaking about the loss and economic precarity that her father experienced, and the pressure he was under to provide for his wider family from the age of nine. She recognised that her mother and father parented under difficult circumstances. Zahra's father eventually sought asylum in Australia. While he coerced her into marriage, she also saw him as 'a trailblazer in the sense that he had a really shitty and hard life. My dad is the hardest working man that I've ever seen. I love him and I respect him for that'. Zahra acknowledged experiences of intergenerational trauma within her family, an issue which is well documented within academic literature.[53]

Julianna was the only participant who did not want a continued relationship with her family. She reported experiencing significant abuse and violence within her family prior to being forced to marry, including an experience of childhood sexual assault by a family member. Julianna described her sister forcing her into a marriage as a way of dealing with Julianna's experience of sexual assault.

> *pretty much my family knew that I was raped by [a family member]. [My sister] went overseas for a wedding, and that's when she accepted the proposal from my ex, and pretty much gave me away. So they organised the whole engagement like that. I was 15 at the time...'*

The women we interviewed and their families had complex histories and traumatic experiences, both as individuals and families. We can see the way they carry their own histories, as well as social and relational histories,[54] and it is not possible to understand coercion into marriage without this context. Attending to the structural issues facing families impacted by forced marriage directs us towards experiences of displacement and sometimes mandatory detention, economic precarity and pressure to provide, experiences of sexual assault, and barriers to accessing mental health and other types of support.

*Communication Practices and Decision-making*

This research aimed to extend understanding of communication practices within families affected by forced marriage. As discussed earlier, family mediation is

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53 C C Sangalang and C Vang, 'Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systematic Review', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, vol. 19, issue 3, 2017, pp. 745–754, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-016-0499-7.

54 Smart and Shipman.

being explored as an option within the response to forced marriage in Australia.[55] Extending our understanding of communication practices within families affected by forced marriage provides important context for consideration within family mediation. Communication practices varied across the participants' families. Three women shared that their families broadly had a practice of open communication.

> *We live together and always talk and discuss things within our family. (Jasmin)*

> *...if something worries me I'd talk to my mum. I love my mum. (Sanaya)*

While they characterised their families generally as providing a safe space for communicating about concerns, they simultaneously described limits and boundaries around the topics discussed. For example, Sanaya, who was monitored closely by her mother, would not always disclose to her that she was spending time with her boyfriend. Nabila said that love was never discussed in her family when she was growing up:

> *I don't even think you'd be able to speak about it with family, to be honest, because of the taboo and stigma around... just talking about love itself.*

Most participants reported that there was little space for disagreement, and sometimes discussion, within their families. Maryam said that in more conservative families in her community young people are not allowed to raise concerns or talk about their wishes for a partner. It was not until Shehzeen was planning suicide that her family initiated a conversation about her well-being:

> *...very rare that female members of the family would have any uncomfortable conversations, especially disagreements with your father. I think if I had not planned to commit suicide, my family would have never asked me about what was going on and why I was so unhappy and depressed about my life.*

In Maryam and Shehzeen's families, conflict work,[56] that is, work to facilitate family functioning, appears to require them to accept the lack of space for discussion and not initiate conversations that they anticipate would be uncomfortable. It is important to highlight that this type of conflict work appears to have been highly detrimental to the women's well-being and sense of self.

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55 Australian Government Department of Social Services; Vidal, 2019.

56 Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

Zahra and Julianna were conditioned from an early age into acceptance of their parents' dominance. Zahra speaks here on the notion of relational choice,[57] indicating that the choices she made were shaped by her conditioning within her family.

> *[About having challenging conversations] No, you would get slapped. We experienced a lot of physical abuse. That's one of the reasons you don't even question whether you have a choice or not, … because you're literally conditioned from the moment that you're born to grow up like this... Your parents say do this, you go, okay. Do that. Okay. And then you have this very, in a sense, toxic relationship with your family. You love them, you can't live with[out] them, because they're all you've ever known. (Zahra)*

> *The household that I grew up [in] was where my father was more religiously strict. More like a dictatorship. Like Kim Jong Un. He was just like, it's my way or the highway... You do as you're told... It was a very strict upbringing. If we ever talked to a boy or anything or if we ever had a handshake with a man. Big no, no, we got told off. We got beaten at, we got slapped. I was abused quite a lot in my childhood. (Julianna)*

In Zahra and Julianna's families, the threat of violence and experiences of violence were used to control the behaviour of family members, creating a home environment that prohibited open or challenging communication. Shariff discusses power dynamics within families and their implications for consensus decision-making around marriage.[58] For our interview participants, power was strongly concentrated within fathers. Zahra reflected on the conflicting feelings that she has for her parents, perhaps feeling the pull of compulsory kinship.[59] She simultaneously loves her parents *and* recognises the abuse she experienced during her childhood. Julianna described her home environment growing up as violent and toxic. The lack of support Julianna received from family, when she sought justice for her experiences of sexual abuse as a child, led her to cease contact with all of her immediate family members. The power of compulsory kinship, which makes parent–child relationships appear natural, inevitable and enduring, comes under strain in circumstances as harmful as those experienced by Julianna.

We also heard about how challenging conversations with parents were shut down. After she had been forced to marry, Sanaya tried to communicate to her mother, to whom she was very close, that her husband was not treating her well:

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57 Smart and Shipman.

58 Shariff.

59 Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

> *I tried to tell her one day it was bumpy, he's not treating me well. I tried, I tried and she's like, 'No, you're married now'. And it was so bumpy, but it was like 'You're married now'.*

Like Zahra, Sanaya felt strongly connected to her mother, and at the time of the interview, she continued to struggle to reconcile her love for her mother and the betrayal she felt when she was coerced into marriage. Prior to being coerced into the marriage, one of the reasons that Sanaya delayed seeking support for her situation was the hope that her mother would ultimately not force her to marry. Sanaya delayed contacting authorities, 'because I was trying to convince myself that I'm better than this and she's better than this', but her mum was too 'hard-headed'. Sanaya was committed to doing this family conflict work,[60] in order to try and find a way through the pressure to marry, while preserving her relationship with her mother. Like the participants in Reczek and Bosley-Smith's work, we can see Sanaya using similar rationales for maintaining her relationship with her mum: the love and closeness she feels, as well as the possibility of parental growth, that is, that her mum would ultimately realise that proceeding with the marriage would be detrimental to Sanaya's well-being.

Family communication practices that we learnt about during our interviews differed, but we observed some broad commonalities. Three participants described communication with their parents as open and supportive in general, but identified areas where communication was more constrained, particularly around intimate relationships and sex. For the other young women, communication was described as more top-down, where parents communicated *to* children and there was not much space to challenge their views. We use the idea of family conflict work[61] to demonstrate how family relationships were managed and what was done in the service of family functioning. We note that conflict work is a concept used to understand the efforts that go into maintaining family relationships, and we are not positing that conflict work is necessarily productive in other ways, such as in managing mental health or individual well-being.

Decision-making: 'I'm doing this for you guys'

Most participants reported there was a view in their families that adults, mostly parents, were best placed to make decisions on behalf of young people. As shown below, participants often reflected that their parents believed they were doing what was best for the family in making these decisions.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

> *Being the oldest and being a girl is tough because my family wanted me to be married at the age of 20 years old. Having a very religious and conservative family, my parents made decisions on their own without getting us involved. When we asked questions about what is going on, they were responding 'It is an adult issue, you don't need to get involved and it is not for you because you don't understand these things'. This is accurate for a lot of families in our community. (Jasmin)*

> *[About her involvement in the decision to migrate] No, we didn't talk about it at all. My mum's like, 'I'm doing this for you guys yada yada yada'... It's never that, oh, do you want to be included in the decision, but it's always like, it's for your own good. (Sanaya)*

While Jasmin, Shehzeen, and Sanaya highlighted their parents' good intentions, they also expressed dissatisfaction about being excluded from decision-making. Jasmin was explicitly told by her mother that they did not need Jasmin's approval for her engagement; Jasmin's mother was just passing on information about the decision they had made.

Participants described family practices that were patriarchal, with fathers or other male relatives being key decision-makers. Nabila said her grandfather would have a decision-making role in the family, if he were still alive. Maryam and Shehzeen said that their parents and older brothers were decision-makers, noting that Maryam's brother was an ally when it came to marriage, as he had himself been forced to marry. Julianna's father was the decision-maker in her household: 'Just the father does whatever he seems right… doesn't ask the mother's opinion, the daughters', the sons', no, no, no.' When reflecting on disagreements between her parents, Hanit said that 'Last call will be my father's. He is the decision-maker... Mum has to follow, otherwise she will not have anywhere to go.' Zahra's father was both a decision-maker and responsible for his family's economic well-being.

> *My dad was like, just the boss. And he is quite an assertive man. Even his siblings would come and ask him for his opinions and other things. He was kind of like the leader amongst his siblings, and amongst a lot of people. (Zahra)*

While it was difficult to find space, at times the women we interviewed challenged their parents' decisions about important matters. Nabila experienced significant emotional costs when refusing to go ahead with the marriage her parents proposed.

> *When I experienced that freeze, I think it was the scariest response... I couldn't get any words out. And … even though I wanted to say no, and tell them how I was thinking or feeling, I'd just cry. This is when I truly felt my voice had been taken away from me.*

The conflict work that Nabila performed in her family was taxing and detrimental to her mental health.

Decision-making practices within families can be entrenched, at times rigidly structured, and highly personal. Nonetheless, support around familial decision-making is an area worthy of consideration within forced marriage prevention and family mediation. Exploring decision-making practices with families must be done in a manner that is sensitive to differences across individuals, families, traditions, and so on. Fathers, and sometimes brothers, held significant power (and responsibility) over decision-making. Communication and decision-making practices within the families of our interviewees demonstrate that awareness-raising and prevention initiatives need to be thoughtfully designed and responsive to particular family contexts. In Zahra and Julianna's family contexts in particular, encouraging young people to communicate their wishes for the future to their parents would not, in their situations, be a meaningful or effective strategy, and may in fact be unsafe. For other families, however, support that builds capacities to engage in open communication may be more fruitful.

*Resilience and Renegotiating Familial Relations*

In this section, we discuss the women's lives and their familial relations after an experience of forced marriage or coercion to marry. While experiencing coercion to marry has profound impacts, the women we interviewed were resilient across many areas of their lives. The stories of what happens after people experience coercion to marry are seldom told in academic research, reports, or media discussions. We reflect here on the women's strengths and how family relationships are renegotiated over the short and longer term, during and following pressure to marry or leaving a forced marriage.

Five of the eight women were either at university or had completed university degrees. The other three had plans or hopes to study in the future. All were working at the time of the interviews; four were employed in community services and others in administration and retail roles. Nabila was passionate about her work and social change: '…my dad is one of those people who always instilled in us that idea if you've got two hands and two feet, you should be doing something with them'. Many participants were juggling numerous responsibilities—across multiple jobs, study, and care for children, or a combination of these. At least two women made ongoing financial contributions to their parents or families, or towards mortgages and other living expenses, reflecting mutual care and duty towards family.[62]

[62] Kaur.

Looking at intimate relationships, five of the women were currently single, two were married, and one had a boyfriend she hoped to marry in the future. Nabila avoided a forced marriage and then married a man whom she described as her 'best mate': 'We get along so well'. Zahra was forced to marry, left the marriage, and was later able to get 'married to someone whom I love'. One of the women who was forced to marry had her marriage annulled, the other three were divorced. The two participants who experienced broken engagements were currently single.

We introduced the idea of familial conflict work earlier in this article.[63] Reczek and Bosley-Smith highlight the endurance of parent–adult child relationships even amidst serious conflict, as well as the work that goes into maintaining what can be very difficult relationships.[64] It is important to highlight some of the costs of conflict work that we observed, including not feeling heard (e.g. Nabila, Sanaya), feeling unable to discuss concerns (Maryam), impacts on personal well-being (Shehzeen), or mistreatment by her husband (Sanaya). Nonetheless, seven of the eight women expressed a desire for continued relationships with their families, and most also reported that they currently had relatively positive relationships with their parents. For example, Nabila talked to her parents 'pretty much every day', and Zahra discussed how important it was for her that her parents pray for her. Zahra strategically involves them in parts of her life, such as her current marriage, but makes other decisions without consultation. Ongoing relationships with parents were more common amongst our participants as compared to those observed in previous work,[65] perhaps as a smaller proportion of our participants were recruited through formal support services.

> *...my parents pray for me a lot, which is very special for me. Like, I want my parents to be happy with me. But of course, I don't want to like compromise my own values. So I'm always dancing with it. (Zahra)*

Familial relations are continually in flux, and families are at least partly constituted by how they engage with 'trouble'.[66] Jasmin reflected that over time, she has not only repaired her relationship with her parents but expressed that their views about marriage have also shifted. Zahra reflects on the way that she forced her parents to think differently.

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63 Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Lyncham and Bricknell; Simmons and Wong.

66 Morgan.

> *Our relationships have repaired, and my parents are much closer to me now than before because they feel guilty for not listening to me and playing a strong role in this. They know that even the engagement has a negative impact on my life too especially when the next proposals I might get as this would limit my options. My parents have apologised to me and have said to me they leave the choice in my hands this time. They said 'we will agree to whoever you want if it is done properly and within our traditions'. (Jasmin)*

> *Now we're like best friends. And it's incredible. Such a long journey to get there. But it was extremely important for me. And it's a fine balance, you have to respect yourself. You have to honour your own safety, security, your own independence, and your own right to a life that is not toxic and abusive. But at the same time, I want to honour my relationship with my parents. Last year, my dad and my mum told me they respect me… in that time that I left them and I grew up, they also grew up, in a way I forced them to think differently. (Zahra)*

Maryam was protective of her parents and did not want others to know what they had done. Her family expressed regret, wished they had listened to Maryam's objections, and told her fiancé's family they would not proceed with the marriage. Conflict work was undertaken within the families of Jasmin, Zahra, and Maryam. Zahra talked about the 'long journey' and emotional work she devoted to her relationship with her parents. The desire for parental growth, as observed in Reczek and Bosley-Smith's work,[67] was realised within these families. These discussions highlight the way that family relationships are continually negotiated and renegotiated over time, and support Zeweri and Shinkfield's assertion that navigating an experience of coercion into marriage can be transformative of family relationships.[68]

Shehzeen moved back into her family home after her divorce, but under very strained circumstances. She communicated to her parents that she would have to move out if the situation did not improve.

> *My relationship with my family has got better now. However, initially, when I got my divorce, no one was willing to talk to me because they believed what I did was completely wrong… I was hoping for the situation to get better, but it was not happening. I had to sit down with them and tell them that if this behaviour continues with me then I will leave their home. This changed the whole situation… they are accepting me with my past.*

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67 Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

68 Zeweri and Shinkfield.

> *It's good now, it was really bumpy at the start. After I moved back in with my mum after I got a divorce, it was very, very bumpy, like really bad. Even now sometimes my mum brings it up, she's like 'you're divorced', and it's like, okay, and who got me married? (Sanaya)*

Sanaya similarly describes a period of tension, when she returned to living with her mother after divorce. The tension eased, but her mother still chides her for being divorced, which Sanaya reminds her mother is her fault. We see the renegotiation of familial relationships in the confrontation between Shehzeen and her parents, and the playful but powerful banter that Sanaya reflects on between herself and her mum.

As discussed earlier, Julianna did not seek out a continued relationship with her immediate family. At the time of our interview, she had not had contact with her family for about two years. One of the last contacts Julianna had with her parents was when they brought her ex-husband to see her, in violation of a court order that was in place against him.

> *Last last contact I had with my younger brother, he was telling me, 'It's so sad to see you publicly shaming your family'. I said, 'I'm not publicly shaming anybody. I'm saying what's the truth...' I can't bring my childhood back, I can't bring my teenage years back, I can't bring my young adulthood back. But I take a stand, at least I'm fighting. Because today my kids will see me that way. (Julianna)*

Julianna takes an empowered position in moving forward with the experience of childhood trauma and forced marriage. Previously, Julianna engaged in family conflict work, seeking acknowledgement from family members of the harms she experienced, but, at the time of our interview, she had disengaged from conflict work. Julianna is driven to protect her children, and to model to them what she sees as good and moral. As noted before, we see the limits of compulsory kinship[69] in Julianna's situation; she has ceased contact with family in an effort to protect herself and her children from further harm.

## Reflections for Forced Marriage Policy and Practice

Individuals who experience coercion into marriage are embedded within familial and community relationships, within complex family lives. Smart and Shipman[70] point out that theorisations about family life need to somehow 'capture the

[69] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

[70] Smart and Shipman.

complex tapestry of competing obligations and aspirations.' We set out to explore the histories and experiences of families affected by forced marriage, to look at communication practices, and to highlight individual resilience and the reconfiguration of family relationships that occurs when navigating forced marriage. In this section, we reflect on two areas where our findings can inform forced marriage policy and practice: (1) family mediation and (2) broad support for families as an important component of forced marriage prevention.

The young women we interviewed placed high value on their family relationships, and many made significant efforts to manage and retain their relationships despite their experiences around forced marriage. However, these efforts notwithstanding, the conflict work undertaken by these young women was at times taxing and detrimental to their mental health and well-being. Participants expressed anger, resentment, and feelings of betrayal towards family members, but also love, mutual care, and a strong sense of duty. Uncomfortably, love, duty, and connection were present alongside coercive, and at times violent and abusive behaviour. The discursive power of families is well captured by Reczek and Bosley-Smith's concept of compulsory kinship,[71] and this concept is useful in explaining, in part, the ongoing pull of families for the women we interviewed. Participants were committed to their families and expressed both connection and obligation to family members. The support that could be provided to those affected by forced marriage and their families through the process of family mediation may lessen this burden on survivors. Therefore, our findings support resourcing of family mediation by appropriately skilled professionals. Given the concerns about family mediation creating space for further coercion,[72] there is a strong need for monitoring and evaluation of family mediation programmes as they are established, and there will be families and circumstances where family mediation is not appropriate.

The second area of policy and practice this research speaks to is the need for support for families affected by forced marriage much earlier than when (forced) marriage is an imminent possibility. We heard about families in this research who had experienced trauma, displacement, sexual violence, and mental health concerns. Clearly broad support for families navigating these types of experiences is critically important. Our research highlights communication within families as one area that could be focused on within prevention activities targeted at families. Within some participants' families, not having space to communicate and contribute to decision-making was normalised from an early age. Communication and decision-making practices may be an important area for forced marriage prevention work, with consideration of the varied dynamics and

[71] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

[72] Dauvergne and Millbank; Gill and Mitra-Kahn.

power relationships that are present within families. Our findings echo the call from the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights for strengths-based parenting programmes that engage with familial decision-making practices.[73]

Life after a forced marriage or an experience of coercion into marriage is an area that we flag as important for further research, and we end this article by highlighting the strengths of the women we interviewed. Studies of forced marriage too seldom reflect on the resilience of those with lived experience. The women we interviewed were working, studying, and pursuing goals they considered worthwhile. In some situations, like Julianna's, resilience required separation from family. Compulsory kinship can break down in these circumstances, and estrangement can be protective, of oneself and one's young family. More commonly, though, we observed ongoing family connectedness, though familial relations were reconfigured through the process of negotiations around marriage.[74] Families are constituted and reconstituted through the ways they both create and respond to problems.[75] Some participants characterised their familial relations, at the time of our interviews, as mutually respectful.

This article has demonstrated the value of focused study of family relationships. Understanding familial histories, communication practices, and relationships is foundational in the design of effective approaches to prevent forced marriage. Our work also shows the utility of sociological concepts, such as family conflict work, compulsory kinship, and the ideas of individual and relational choice, for the study of forced marriage.

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[73] Prattis and El Matrah.

[74] Zeweri and Shinkfield.

[75] Morgan.

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