

# Partner choice, arranged and forced marriages

## Perspective of young people and their parents in the Dutch multicultural society

LEYLA ÇINIBULAK

It is Friday afternoon; a Youth Care professional calls in. What should she do? An Afghan girl is coming in to talk to her shortly. This same day she has also scheduled a meeting with the girl's father. Should she meet with them together or separately? Is it wise to seek refuge for the girl? Will the girl be safe if she stays at the family home for the weekend? She is 16 and she has been seeing a boy. Via the community her parents have found out about her Dutch boyfriend. The girl is afraid that she will be forced to marry. The professional tells us that she has minimal contact with the father. What to do?

To be able to offer effective support it is critical to apprehend the problem. Teachers, trainers and other professionals working with young people in the Netherlands are often late discovering cases of forced marriage or involuntary partner choice. This is mostly due to the fact that they have too little knowledge of this complex matter, or because they are paralysed by the intensity of the problems and feel that there is not much they can do. Another difficulty is that these young people often don't speak about their problems and therefore live in isolation. Various studies show that involuntary partner choice and forced marriage lead to serious consequences: conflicts in the family (Yerden, 2001), girls running away from home (Brouwer, 1997), suicide and suicide attempts (Nijhuis et al, 2005).

### Free choice is a human right

'Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.' (Universal Declaration of the Human Rights, article 16 (2)). To autonomously choose your partner, to get married or not and when is a human right. Although, almost every country is member of the United Nations and thus underlines this Universal Declaration of the Human Rights, not every young person, also in the Netherlands, is able to enjoy this freedom of choice. Human rights lawyer and author of *De bruid van de dood* (death's bride), Naema Tahir, was cast out by her parents when she refused to marry her cousin in London.

At the national congress on forced marriages in Amsterdam in 2008 Tahir speaks:

In Pakistan the father is the dominant protector by tradition. Daughters need to be protected; they are to practice only chastity and modesty. By the migration to the West with its emancipated female population the daughters enter their father's domain. They need less protection and the Dutch welfare state and other circumstances enable them to fend for themselves. There is no stopping the women's emancipation process but it must be recognized that many fathers end up feeling less needed and that the emancipation of women affects their notion of status and male honour. They are confronted with a double loss of status. Firstly, in the home country the father's role used to be clear: to take care of the family. In the West the father is unable or hardly capable of keeping the family. Second, the social context of the West is completely different. Other parties, including the government, protect women. Men react to this in two ways: staying immobile or trying to regain their status.

In her presentation, Tahir clearly illustrates how migration affects traditional male/female roles and family relations. She also explains how involuntary partner choice and forced marriages can become more rigid phenomena in the context of migration.

### Defining forced marriage

We speak of forced marriage when a girl, a boy, a man or a woman is not allowed to refuse the partner the family has chosen for him or her. In a forced marriage one or both persons in the marriage have little or no say in the matter. The marriage is sealed against their will and refusing is not an option. Besides being forced to accept a designated partner, victims of forced marriage are often forced to marry before a certain age. If young people go against their parents will and find a partner on their own they are often cut off from any communication with the parents or their sexual/love relationship is simply not recognized and ignored.

The exact number of forced marriages in the Netherlands is unknown. There is no specific registration, only cases reported by schools, police, care organisations and social facilities. Also, it is not easy to determine whether duress or force is involved, both because these matters occur in the closeness of the (extended) family and because victims don't always share their stories. The cases that are actually reported are only a fraction of the total number. In a study on partner choice among Turkish and Moroccan young

people (Sterckx & Bouw, 2005) it is estimated that seventy percent of the Turkish and sixty percent of the Moroccan young people marries a partner from their parent's home country. Besides arranged and love marriages, a part of these marriages is thought to be more or less forced. However, on this subject of force their study was not quantified.

Victims are girls and, to a lesser extent, boys, gay and heterosexual, with or without physical or mental handicap, living in the Netherlands or in their parents home country. Forced marriages and involuntary partner choice occur in all ethnic and religious communities and social layers but mostly in Turkish, Moroccan, Hindu, Somali, Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, Kurdish, Chinese and Roma communities. However, this is not merely a migrant or Muslim issue; forced marriages are also common in very closed off autochthonous communities like the Bible Belt and in higher social circles (aristocratic families). Force can be exerted by parents, other kin in the Netherlands or from the parent's home country, and by the social community. There are different forms of force, defined as either pressure or persuasion. In practice pressure or explicit force by parents can be as followed: 'we wish you a good future and therefore this marriage is ideal', or 'we are your parents, we know you very well and know also who is good for you', or 'before we pass away we want to see you happy', 'if you don't listen you are our daughter or son not anymore', 'I am going to hurt myself if you refuse this marriage'. Social pressure is a powerful force, mental and physical parental force, extended family and the community. The parents can also feel pressured socially.

### Thin line

Sometimes there is a thin line between an arranged and forced marriage. When parents look for a suitable marriage candidate for their son or daughter or when there is mediation by parents, one speaks of an arranged marriage. Also in the West, mediating parties like friends and dating-sites and mediation agencies are gaining popularity. They select suitable candidates based on character, lifestyle, values and religion. Worldwide, there are many different opinions on arranged marriages. Arranged marriages are all right as long as both parties happily agree with the mediation. If, however, the mediation includes any form of force, it is considered a forced marriage. A number of Western organisations argue that every arranged marriage includes at least some form of force, like for example social pressure, and are thus forced marriages. Others clearly distinguish arranged marriages

and forced marriages. Thus, in their research, Koning and Bartels (2005) describe a continuum of independent free partner choice to explicitly forced marriages, with in-between a vast grey area of social and mental pressure and subtle force.

### Parent's motives

How is it that parents wish to have a say in their children's choice of partner? And that parents and other family members force young people into marriage? All over the world parents wish only the best for their children. They meddle, introduce and promote partners or bluntly force their sons or daughters into marriage. They often act out of love, care and protection. In their eyes they are by no means enforcing anything upon their children. The projects by MOVISIE and the Forced Marriage Unit in London – with whom we cooperate closely – serve to demonstrate that parents have multiple reasons and motivations for their actions (MOVISIE, 2009; FMU, 2009):

- Parents wish to strengthen (international) family ties, for example by a marital bond between cousins, nieces and nephews.
- They wish their child to settle in a stable social economic situation.
- They wish to prevent their daughter or son from a bad choice of partner.
- Parents feel it is only natural that they should select a partner for their son or daughter.
- Parents may feel socially pressured by the ethnic community and are afraid that they will be excluded if they resist or reject their ways.
- Family ties and the community are extremely important, especially in the context of migration, and parents want to prevent their children from marrying outside their social, ethnic or religious community.
- Parents disagree with the modern ways of freedom of the West, also with regard to partner choice. Sex before marriage, homosexuality and a Western lifestyle are considered reprehensible and they wish to prevent their sons and/or daughters from adopting similar behaviour.
- Parents are seeking to secure their own future by finding a 'proper' and desirable daughter in law.
- Parents force their children into marriage to secure or add to the family fortune, to expand the social economic network or to acquire a Dutch residence permit for the partner in the country of origin.

### What do the young people themselves say?

How do young people deal with involuntary partner choice and forced marriages? De Koning and Bartels (2005) conducted a research among Moroccan, Turkish and Hindu youngsters in the Netherlands and found that young people feel a lot of pressure to marry someone of their parent's choice and that they feel they can't refuse for loyalty to their parents. Storms and Bartels (2008) conducted a qualitative study among the Turkish, Moroccan, Kurdish, Hindu, Pakistani, Afghan and Somali community in Amsterdam. More and more young people claim that they are making their own choices, except that these choices are made from their parent's perspective. In other words, they aim to, at least partly, meet their parent's preferences and desires. Another outcome was that arranged marriages, apparently, are still very common. Highly educated and financially independent young people wish to and are capable of resisting the pressure and force. In addition, the study shows that force and social pressure are explained differently by parents and young people. Unfortunately, it remains an obscure subject.

Victims reactions vary considerably, from accepting their faith and 'making the best of it' to consistent resistance, running away and, in a few cases, mental illnesses: depression, suicide or suicide attempts. Young people often believe they have no choice. Halime Yarba, a woman of Turkish descent and the author of *Ongeschreven tradities* ('Unwritten traditions', 2009), shared the story of her own forced marriage at a working conference in 2009:

It is very important that girls are supported by professionals and motivated to carefully consider their opportunities and choices. They need to become aware of the fact that they have a choice and that their choices have consequences. This would have certainly helped me when I was forced into marriage.

Most young people refrain from seeking professional help. This is a very big step and they are extremely loyal to their parents and the ethnic community. At the 2010 Youth Conference Your Right 2Choose! young people explained that they don't want to choose between their parents and their partner. They want both. They also do not like professionals to bluntly impose on them the individualistic ways of the west.

## Shame and loyalty

Young people who wish to discuss the subject of forced marriage and related problems have to face the fact that their parents and other people around them will not appreciate this. Openness can lead to serious consequences for themselves, their sisters and brothers, for their parents and even the community. Their name and honour may be affected and the entire family runs the risk of being excluded. The message is: keep your problems in the family. Strongly influenced by the collective culture, families and next of kin are determined to keep any problems within the family as much as possible. In the Netherlands this closeness is often even stronger as they rely even more on their ethnic community. Furthermore, the current position of migrants is vulnerable, the us/them polarisation is growing and there are some offensive social debates, mostly on Muslim families and young Muslims. Furthermore, feelings of shame and guilt are enhanced by loyalty conflicts. These conflicts around loyalty arise where young people find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place: their personal needs and those of the family, their self love and the love for their parents, their urge to become independent and their vulnerability and dependency. All this makes the subject of partner choice and the violence that often comes with it, a difficult and complex matter to discuss.

## Young people need adequate help

Young people who are confronted with forced marriage face a major dilemma: marry their parent's choice or be ostracized from the family. The parents have to answer a similar question: how do we secure our honour in the community without resorting to force or violence, and without cutting off their child? In general, parents and young people from traditional migrant families do not or hardly discuss partner choice or marriage. This complicates matters for professionals who are dealing with young people (and parents) who are faced with these issues. It is important that all facets are considered without exception on grounds that it is strange or not right in 'our' culture. Young people need to be heard, to really connect and to build strong bonds of trust. From the MOVISIE projects with young people and migrant organisations we have learned that young people and parents are quite willing to talk openly as long as their problems are not unjustly made out to be merely caused by their culture or religion. Furthermore, they want to discuss the issue from a human rights perspective. Young

people need to be treated with respect and they and their lives have to be taken seriously. Subsequently, they can be supported with tools to promote free partner choice and nonviolent communication with their parents, to prevent opposite ideas, expectations and needs of young people and their families/ communities to lead to force and domestic violence.

### **Your Right 2choose!**

Truly abolishing forced marriages requires a change in mentality and behaviour. This must come from the young people, their parents and the communities themselves. To promote awareness on free partner choice among young people, parents and communities, MOVISIE has launched the Your Right 2choose! Campaign (2010 and 2011). In addition, MOVISIE invites young people and their parents to work on empowerment by exploring and developing alternative actions with regard to forced marriages and tools for nonviolent communication. We will start developing these tools together with youngster and parents in separate and joined focus-group meetings in August 2011. These tools will include alternatives for violent communication and behaviour.

#### **Note**

This article is based on several activities performed under MOVISIE: literature study and national and international projects on the action against forced marriages. Project activities: organising conferences for professionals and policy makers, pitching the subject to the government, care and social organisations, launching and moderating a website for professionals, launching the Your right 2Choose! campaign for young people, parents and professionals and a manual for professionals to introduce the subject of forced marriages and free partner choice at school. [www.movisie.nl/huwelijksdwang](http://www.movisie.nl/huwelijksdwang).

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