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FORCED MARRIAGE IN *An analysis of the current situation* BELGIUM

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*Marriage shall be
entered into only with
the free and full consent
of the intending spouses*

PREFACE

The right to marry without being compelled or forced is a democratic imperative and an unquestionable aspect of fundamental rights. For several years Belgium has demonstrated its policy against forced marriages by means of a national action plan against violence based on gender, uniting the Federal State, the Communities and Regions and coordinated by the Institute for equality of women and men. Belgium has chosen to apprehend the problem by paying special attention to prevention, notably through awareness campaigns, school-based education programs and training for professionals in multiple sectors: police, justice, health, education and social work.

In March 2015, the Institute for the equality of women and men had the pleasure to organize, in collaboration with the International Centre for Reproductive Health (ICRH) and Plan Belgium, a symposium entitled “Child marriage and forced marriage in Belgium and in Belgium’s partner countries.”

A study by the International Centre for Reproductive Health, presented at the symposium, highlighted that professionals feel inadequately trained, lack intercultural skills, information and practical tools to identify and recognize forced marriages, and have insufficient knowledge about action guidelines, current legislation and the rights of the victims.

Forced marriage is indeed a very complex issue. Professionals experience real difficulties in, firstly, assessing whether they are actually dealing with a forced marriage and, secondly, in supporting victims of forced marriage when a case has been identified.

In June 2015, the Institute for the equality of women and men sought to respond to these gaps by publishing a guide for professionals aiming to provide practical solutions to professionals, by improving knowledge of the phenomenon, providing tools to improve detection of forced marriages and by offering advice to support and / or refer victims adequately.

However, cases continue to be reported regularly by specialized associations and therefore require the authorities to continue their efforts to prevent such practices.

It is essential to maintain and reinforce the measures of prevention, awareness and information but also to support measures for victims to ensure effective monitoring of forced marriage situations.

Therefore, a new national action plan against violence based on gender 2015-2019 has been recently developed. It is the fruit of a long consultation process between the various concerned ministers and is based on the recommendations of civil society. It aims to pursue a coherent and coordinated policy whereby the federal state, the communities and regions work closely together to implement 235 new measures against violence based on gender, including forced marriages.

Furthermore, the imminent ratification of the Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence by Belgium should also encourage us to intensify efforts in the fight against forced marriages.

In this context, the Institute for the equality of women and men would like to commend the quality of the work done under the MATRIFOR project and welcomes the analysis of the current situation, compiled by Professor Els Leye and Alexia Sabbe of the International Centre for Reproductive Health, on forced marriage in Belgium. This remarkable analysis helps to better visualize the current policy of our country and is, without a doubt, an invitation to make every effort to prevent forced marriages and assist those who are, unfortunately, victims.

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November 2015

This report documents the results of a study on forced marriage in Belgium, in the framework of the multi-country MATRIFOR project, led by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

The MATRIFOR project is aimed at studying forced marriage as a new form of trafficking in human beings in Europe. The project ran from November 2012 to November 2015 (36 months). The study was carried out in Belgium (by the International Centre for Reproductive Health at Ghent University), Italy (by le Onde Onlus, Palermo) and Spain (by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). It was financed by the European Commission's 'Prevention of and Fight against Crime' programme (DG Home Affairs).



methodology

The methodology of the project consisted of qualitative research and combined in-depth interviews (fieldwork) with a legal analysis (desk study). The main objectives of the fieldwork were to study the characteristics of forced marriage and to study the main obstacles and difficulties in seeking legal redress in cases thereof.

Professionals from various sectors who are dealing with forced marriages were interviewed (for example, policymakers, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, police, health-service workers, social-service workers, schoolteachers, and those working for NGOs specialising in the issues of forced marriage and violence against women, and migrant women's associations).

The interviews were semi-structured. Recruitment of respondents was based on a list of possible interviewees from a former project on forced marriage, and by using the snowballing technique. Respondents were sought by contacting NGOs and agencies working in the field.

In total, 25 stakeholders were contacted between 22 August 2013 and 15 March 2014. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. All respondents signed a letter of consent and agreed that the interviews were recorded. The Ethics Committee at Ghent University also provided clearance for this study.

3

legal and policy

framework on forced

marriages in Belgium

3.1 BELGIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FORCED MARRIAGES

3.1.1 Civil law

In order to marry in Belgium, a procedure must be followed, which consists of two steps:¹ the notification of the marriage to the registrar, and the actual conclusion of the marriage.²

A marriage needs to comply with a number of basic principles of contract law, and a number of fundamental conditions, and should not be contrary to the principles of public order.³ A forced marriage can never be established in a valid manner, seeing as the fundamental requirement of free and full consent of the marriage candidates has not been established.⁴

Article 146ter of the Civil Code: ‘There is no marriage when it is entered into without the free consent of both spouses or if the consent of at least one of the spouses was given under violence or threat.’⁵

Furthermore, to marry in Belgium, a person must have reached the age of 18 years.⁶ However, exemptions are possible. In a special procedure in the youth court, with the explicit consent of the parents, the minimum-age requirement may be reduced if there are ‘serious reasons’ for doing so. If parents refuse to give their consent or fail to appear, or if they are not capable of expressing their opinion, the court may nonetheless authorise the marriage if it considers the refusal to be unreasonable.⁷

Marriages of convenience, contracted for the sole purpose of obtaining a visa or residence permit for one of the parties, are closely linked to forced marriages in the Belgian public and political arena.⁸ The legal framework contains a number of measures to address these marriages of convenience.

The first regulation was introduced in 1999. The Marriage of Convenience Act of 4 May 1999⁹ makes it mandatory for civil authorities to notify the public prosecution service if there is doubt about the content or purpose of the marriage.¹⁰ Belgian law contains the principle that a marriage contracted by a person who lacks marital capacity is void.¹¹

1 Art. 63 in 64 of the Civil Code; Art. 165-167 of the Civil Code.

2 Federaal Centrum voor de analyse van de migratiestromen, de bescherming van de grondrechten van de vreemdelingen en de strijd tegen mensenhandel. *Migratie. Jaarverslag*. [Federal Centre for the analysis of migration flows, the protection of fundamental rights of foreigners and the fight against human trafficking. *Migration. Annual Report.*], 2013.

3 Art. 1108 of the Civil Law; Art. 144-164 of the Civil Law.

4 De Brabander, A. *De strafrechtelijke en criminologische dimensie van het gedwongen huwelijk. Masterproef van de opleiding ‘Master in de rechten’* [The criminal and criminological dimension of forced marriage. Master thesis of Ms in Law]. UGent, 2012.

5 The law of 2 June 2013 replaced the word ‘and’ to ‘or’ in Art. 146ter of the Civil Code.

6 Art. 144 of the Belgian Civil Code.

7 Rude-Antoine, E. *Forced marriages in Council of Europe member states: A comparative study of legislation and political initiatives, comparison of law and political actions*. Strasbourg, Council of Europe, Directorate General of Human Rights, 2005.

8 Ratia, E. and Walter, A. *International exploration on forced marriages: A study on legal initiatives, policies and public discussions in Belgium, France, Greece, UK and Switzerland*. 2009.

9 Act of 4 May 1999 amending certain provisions on marriage.

10 At the same time, the new law introduced a legal ground for the annulment of marriages of convenience, Art. 146bis of the Belgian Civil Code.

11 Art. 502 of the Belgian Civil Code.

Marriage of convenience is defined in Article 146bis of the Civil Code, as follows:

‘There is no marriage when, despite the formal consents to the marriage, the totality of circumstances demonstrates that at least one of the spouses does not have the intention to establish a sustainable union, but is aimed at obtaining a residence permit.’

The law foresees aggravating circumstances for those who receive a sum of money for concluding such a marriage of convenience, or who use threats or violence to force someone into such a marriage. Attempting to force someone into a marriage of convenience is also tackled by law.

Larger cities, such as Antwerp, Ghent and Kortrijk, established specialised administrative units (*cel schijnhuwelijk*) to tackle supposed marriages of convenience and forced marriages. This is further evidence of the strong link in Belgian policy between marriages of convenience and forced marriages.

The law of 2 June 2013, on marriages of convenience, introduced the concepts of ‘forced legal cohabitation’ and ‘cohabitation of convenience’ in Article 1476ter and Article 1476bis of the Civil Code, respectively:¹²

‘There is no legal cohabitation when this cohabitation was entered without free consent of both legal cohabitants or when consent of at least one of the legal cohabitants was given under violence or threats.’

‘There is no legal cohabitation when, despite the expressed will of both parties to cohabit legally, it’s apparent from a set of circumstances that the intention of at least one of the parties is aimed at obtaining a residence permit.’

In order to determine if the intended cohabitation complies with these definitions, an inquiry procedure for the civil servant of the registry office was also introduced in the Civil Code.¹³

The law of 2 June 2013 also regulates the exchange of information with a database on marriages of convenience and cohabitations of convenience, effectively enabling the exchange of relevant data between authorities. This database was created in April 2014.

12 Act of 2 June 2013 amending the Civil Code, the Law of 31 December 1851 on consulates and consular right(s) of power, the Penal Code, the Judicial Code and the Law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of foreigners, regarding the fight against marriages of convenience and cohabitations of convenience (BS 23/09/2013); Circular 6 September 2013 on Law of 2 June 2013; Circular 17 September 2013 regarding the exchange of information between civil servants of the Civil Registry and the Department of Foreigners’ Affairs regarding notification of marriage or a declaration of legal cohabitation of a foreigner in illegal or precarious residence.

13 Federaal Centrum voor de analyse van de migratiestromen, de bescherming van de grondrechten van de vreemdelingen en de strijd tegen mensenhandel. *Migratie. Jaarverslag*. [Federal Centre for the analysis of migration flows, the protection of fundamental rights of foreigners and the fight against human trafficking. *Migration. Annual Report.*], 2013.

3.1.2 Criminal law¹⁴

Forcing someone to marry has been a criminal offence since 25 April 2007. The Belgian specific criminal law on forced marriages entered into force on 5 May 2007. It was added as Article 391 sexies to the Criminal Code. The article reads as follows:

'He who forces someone by violence or threats to enter into a marriage shall be punished with imprisonment from one month to two years, or with a fine of one hundred to five hundred euro. The attempt is punished with imprisonment from fifteen days to one year or a fine of fifty to two hundred fifty euro.'

Article 391 sexies does not provide a definition of forced marriage. The preparatory works of parliament indicate that a marriage is a forced marriage when one or both partners are forced to consent to the marriage by family or third persons.¹⁵ According to the Belgian law of 25 April 2007, a forced marriage can be annulled if it was not entered into freely by either one of the spouses, or if it was contracted under the influence of violence or threat.¹⁶ One of the two spouses or the public prosecution service can initiate proceedings.¹⁷

The law of 2 June 2013, as aforementioned, also amended the penal code by augmenting the penalties for forced marriage and marriage/cohabitation of convenience. In addition, it altered the role of the criminal judge. From that date onwards, the judge has had the capacity to annul a marriage or cohabitation of convenience.¹⁸ Table 2 provides an overview of the changes in penalties.

14 This piece is adapted from: Ratia, E. and Walter, A. *International exploration on forced marriages: A study on legal initiatives, policies and public discussions in Belgium, France, Greece, UK and Switzerland*. 2009.

15 De Brabander, A. *De strafrechtelijke en criminologische dimensie van het gedwongen huwelijk. Masterproef van de opleiding 'Master in de rechten' [The criminal and criminological dimension of forced marriage. Master thesis of Ms in Law]*. UGent, 2012.

16 Art. 146ter of the Belgian Civil Code.

17 Rude-Antoine, E. *Forced marriages in Council of Europe member states: A comparative study of legislation and political initiatives, comparison of law and political actions*. Strasbourg, Council of Europe, Directorate General of Human Rights, 2005.

18 Federaal Centrum voor de analyse van de migratiestromen, de bescherming van de grondrechten van de vreemdelingen en de strijd tegen mensenhandel. *Migratie. Jaarverslag*. [Federal Centre for the analysis of migration flows, the protection of fundamental rights of foreigners and the fight against human trafficking. *Migration. Annual Report.*], 2013.

OLD LAW	NEW LAW	OLD LAW	NEW LAW
Forced marriage		Forced legal cohabitation	
1 month-2 years OR 100€-500€ 15 days-1 year OR 50€-250€	3 months-5 years AND 250€-5000€ 2 months-3 years AND 125€-2500€	- -	3 months-5 years AND 250€-5000€ 2 months-3 years AND 125€-2500€
Marriage of convenience		Cohabitations of convenience	
8 days-3 months OR 26€-100€ 26€-50€	1 month-3 years AND 50€-500€ 15 days-1 year AND 26€-250€	- -	1 month-3 years AND 50€-500€ 15 days-1 year AND 26€-250€
Marriage of convenience with payment of a sum of money		Cohabitations of convenience with payment of a sum of money	
15 days-1 year OR 50€-250€ 8 days-6 months OR 26€-125€	2 months-4 years AND 100€-2500€ 1 month-2 years AND 50€-1250€	- -	2 months-4 years AND 100€-2500€ 1 month-2 years AND 50€-1250€
Forced marriage of convenience		Forced cohabitation of convenience	
1 month-2 years OR 100€-500€ 15 days-1 year OR 50€-250€	3 months-5 years AND 250€-5000€ 2 months-3 years AND 125€-2500€	- -	3 months-5 years AND 250€-5000€ 2 months-3 years AND 125€-2500€

As shown in the table above,¹⁹ this new law substantially increased the punishments for marriages of convenience and forced marriages.

Since 2009, there has been a specific indictment code for forced marriages in the database of the correctional chambers of the Court of First Instance. According to the figures, 12 cases of forced marriage were registered by the prosecution services in 2010, and 15 cases in 2011. There is also a specific police code for this offence. Police crime statistics reveal 13 complaints of forced marriage (11 actual cases and two attempts) in 2010. Improved awareness among victims and enhanced detection by professionals will probably result in increasing numbers of complaints.²⁰

19 Table presented at 'Studiedag Nieuwe Regelingen betreffende Schijnhuwelijken, Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken'. [The New Regulations Regarding Marriages of Convenience' study day. Department of Foreigners' Affairs] organised by Vanden Broele (n.d.).

20 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2 October 2012) Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Seventh periodic reports of States parties due in 2012 Belgium, [Online]. Available: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g13/412/58/pdf/g1341258.pdf?openelement> [24 Nov 2014].

As early as 2005, Belgium adopted a law making trafficking in human beings a specific criminal offence. The law of August 10th, 2005, established a new chapter on human trafficking in the criminal code. Human Trafficking is defined as follows in Art 433quinquies of the Criminal Code:

“Trafficking in human beings is constituted by the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving a person, or taking or transferring control exercised over that person, :

- 1) For the purpose of exploitation of prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation;
- 2) For the purpose of exploitation of begging;
- 3) For the purpose of work or services in conditions contrary to human dignity;
- 4) For the purpose of organ removal in violation of the law of June 13 1986 regarding the removal and transplantation of organs, or removal of tissues or human corporal material in violation of the law of December 19 2008 regarding the procurement and use of human corporal material on the removal and transplantation of organs for medical or scientific research purposes;
- 5) or for the purpose of making that person commit a crime or misdemeanour against his/her will.”

The law of 2 June 2013 changed the terminology of Art 433 quinquies to incorporate ‘taking control’ over a person. This makes it possible to more effectively target actions such as buying and illegal adoption of the control over a person in the framework of a forced marriage.²¹ The purposes of exploitation were also expanded/clarified, for example, sexual exploitation, which now includes sexual slavery. In addition, a specific reference is made to services regarding exploitation through labour.

In its 2013 annual report, the Federal Centre for the Analysis of Migration Flows obtained knowledge of the practical application of provisions on human trafficking relating to child marriage. It involved a case of a customary marriage of two minors, in which the girl was younger than 16. The case was brought before the Criminal Court of Verviers.²²

In this case, the parents of these minors were prosecuted, among others, for trafficking for sexual exploitation, rape, and violation of integrity with violence and threats.

The two families wanted to establish a love relationship between their children. The parents of the young man handed over a sum of money to the parents of the young girl. That amount was dependent on whether the girl was a virgin or not, as tradition dictates. A celebration was held, after which the minors had sexual relations. The young girl also moved into the family home of the young man. She had to perform household chores, so she was often absent from school.

21 Parl. St., Kamer. *Amendment to the proposal of law to alter article 433 quinquies of the Criminal Code with the aim of clarifying and expanding the definition of human trafficking for sexual exploitation* (Doc 53 2607/002). (n.d.).

22 Verviers Criminal Court. 30 January 2014. 11th K. (definitive).

The court considered the charges of rape and violation of integrity by the co-perpetrators (the parents) as well founded,²³ even though they did not commit the act(s) themselves, and even though they were not present during the act. The parents had established the relationship of their children and had organised an event that led to sexual relations. By establishing a framework and by wanting to comply with tradition, the court ruled that the parents had done everything so that the young man would not hesitate, and was even encouraged to violate, the chastity and virginity of the young girl.

As for the trafficking of human beings, the court assumed that there had indeed been a transfer of control of the minor girl, in order to facilitate rape and violation of integrity with violence and threats. The transfer of authority was apparent, both from the handover of the money, as well as from the 'removal' of the minor to the family of the young man. Moreover, all defendants were aware that the ceremony that was organised would lead to sexual relations between the children.²⁴

3.1.3 Migration law²⁵

The Belgian migration legislation is described in the Aliens Act of December 1980 and the Royal Decree of 8 October 1981.²⁶ The Aliens Act has been amended several times in recent years, with the aim of preventing forced marriages and marriages of convenience.²⁷ These changes were necessary to 'follow the evolution of migration politics and to adapt Belgian legislation in order to comply with directives of the European Union, and various international binding treaties (for example, Schengen or Dublin)'.²⁸

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- 23 According to Art. 66 of the Criminal Code, perpetrators of an offence or crime are 'those who have committed the offence or crime or who collaborated directly to commit it; those who have – by any act to commit – provided support so that the crime or the offence could not have taken place otherwise'.
 - 24 Federal Centre for the Analysis of Migration Flows, the Protection of Fundamental Rights of Foreigners and the Fight against Human Trafficking (2014) *Annual Report Human Trafficking 2013*, [Online], Available: <http://www.diversitybelgium.be/annual-report-human-trafficking-2013> [26 Nov 2015].
 - 25 De Brabander, A. *De strafrechtelijke en criminologische dimensie van het gedwongen huwelijk. Masterproef van de opleiding 'Master in de rechten' [The criminal and criminological dimension of forced marriage. Master thesis of Ms in Law]*. UGent, 2012.
 - 26 Law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of aliens (Aliens Act); Royal Decree of 8 October 1981 on access to the territory, residence, settlement and expulsion of aliens.
 - 27 Act of 15 September 2006 amending the Law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, BS 6 October 2006; Act of 25 April 2007 amending the Law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, BS 10 May 2007; Act of 8 July 2011 amending the Law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, establishment and removal of foreigners as regards the conditions for family reunification, BS 12 September 2011 (this law entered into force on 22 September 2011); Act of 2 June 2013 amending the Civil Code, the law of 31 December 1851 regarding the consulates and consular power of justice, the Penal Code, the Judiciary Code and the law of 15 December 1980 regarding access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of foreigners, regarding the fight against marriages of convenience and cohabitations of convenience, BS, 23 September 2013.
 - 28 *Activiteitenrapport (2013) Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken: FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, [Annual Report 2013. Department Foreigners' Affairs Federal Public Service Internal Affairs]*, [Online], Available: https://dofi.ibz.be/sites/dvzoe/nl/documents/2013_nl.pdf [26 Nov 2015].

Most notably, the rules for marriage migration have been made stricter, especially by the law of 15 September 2006. Belgium was spurred on by Directive 2003/86/EC²⁹ and indirectly influenced by several other member states (especially the Netherlands, Austria and Germany).³⁰

The rules regarding family-reunification³¹ and family-forming³² migration were tightened. The increase of the minimum age from 18 to 21 years, for both a sponsor and a spouse entering the country, is an important element. Additionally, the control period was extended to three years, so it takes three years to obtain a final residence permit. This entails that if you divorce within that period, the temporary residence permit is withdrawn.

The law of 8 July 2011 introduced stricter requirements with the aim of preventing future abuses: a minimum income requirement (120% of the minimum subsistence allowance³³), housing requirements (elementary quality conditions with regards to safety, health and living arrangements) and health insurance.³⁴ The rules do differ slightly depending on whether the person entitled to family reunification is a Belgian, an EU citizen, or a third-country national. Since the changes in the law were introduced, the number of refusals of family-reunification residence permits has decreased substantially.

29 Directive 2003/86/EC, aimed at harmonising immigration policies throughout Europe, has given shape to today's landscape. The directive expressly offers the possibility to adopt rules that limit the right to family reunification and states that 'in order to ensure better integration and to prevent forced marriages, Member States may require the sponsor and his/her spouse to be of a minimum age, and at maximum 21 years old, before the spouse is able to join him/her'.

30 Ratia, E. and Walter, A. *International exploration on forced marriages: A study on legal initiatives, policies and public discussions in Belgium, France, Greece, UK and Switzerland*. 2009.

31 In the context of marriage migration, it presupposes the existence of a partnership (spouse or equivalent partner, legally registered partner). On the basis of this partnership, the non-resident partner acquires the residence permit in Belgium through the procedure for family reunification. See: Desmet, G., Leys, D. and Ronsijn, W. *Partnarmigratie van derdelanders naar Vlaanderen en Brussel. Een kwantitatieve en kwalitatieve studie. Vlaamse Overheid en Europees Integratie Fonds. [Partnarmigration of third country national to Flandres and Brussels. A quantitative and qualitative study, Flemish Government and European Integration Fund] 2011.*

32 When a foreigner comes to Belgium with the aim of entering into a marriage or to conclude a legal partnership, the term 'family formation' is used. There is as yet no formal link between the two people. At this point, Immigration Services will check if there are any indications that the union is forced or that it is a marriage of convenience. After consummation of the marriage or the conclusion of the legal cohabitation, the reunification process starts. The rules and requirements for family reunification then also apply to the case of 'family formation'. See: Desmet et al. *Partnarmigratie van derdelanders naar Vlaanderen en Brussel. Een kwantitatieve en kwalitatieve studie. Vlaamse Overheid en Europees Integratie Fonds. [Partnarmigration of third country nationals to Flanders and Brussels. A quantitative and qualitative study. Flemish Government and European Integration Fund] 2011.*

33 € 1,307 per month (September 2013) [Online], Available: <http://www.kruispuntmi.be> [17 Jul 2014].

34 De Brabander, A. *De strafrechtelijke en criminologische dimensie van het gedwongen huwelijk. Masterproef van de opleiding 'Master in de rechten' [The criminal and criminological dimension of forced marriage. Master thesis of Ms in Law]*. UGent, 2012.

In its 2013 annual report, the Department of Foreign Affairs explains the decrease in refusals as follows:

'This is due to the new requirement for the person who wants to reunify the family: he/she has to prove that he/she has stable, regular and sufficient means of income. Many of these "family-reunifiers" have work that is not stable, have insufficient income, or receive a minimal allowance or unemployment allowance without actively seeking a job.'

The Department also noted that abuses of the law occur. Examples of these abuses are: providing false salary slips, false declarations of fatherhood, or situations in which the foreigner has substantial income but the family-reunifier lives in social housing, or scenarios in which the wife receives social assistance/support, but the husband proves to have an income from a shop abroad.³⁵

The law provides protection for victims of intrafamilial violence. If you are a victim of severe violence, for example, rape and intentional injuries,³⁶ your residence permit is not terminated. Strong evidence is required, but there is no need for the perpetrator to be prosecuted or sentenced. In the case of severe psychological violence, the regulations are even stricter. More evidence is required over a longer period of time than required in the case of mere physical violence. The same conditions apply as with the three-year control period (job or minimum-income requirement, housing, health insurance).

In addition, there are a number of bilateral employment agreements with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey and countries that have emerged from the former Yugoslavia. These agreements have a direct effect from which certain obligations are derived. A standard article in these agreements establishes the following:

'The workers [who] are employed and reside in Belgium may be joined by their families once they have worked for three months, provided that they have decent housing for their families (spouse and dependent minor children).'

Spouses from these states do not have to reach the age of 18 years. However, since 2010, Immigration Services systematically ignore these bilateral agreements by, for example, applying the stricter minimum-age conditions. Immigration Services justified this by referring to jurisprudence of the Council for Immigration Disputes. Nevertheless, the law of 8 July 2011 has confirmed this practice, providing a legal ground for Immigration Services' procedures.

35 Activiteitenrapport (2013) Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken: FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, [Activity Report 2013, Department Foreigners' Affairs, Federal Public Service Internal Affairs] [Online], Available: https://dofi.ibz.be/sites/dvzoe/nl/documents/2013_nl.pdf [26 Nov 2015].

36 Art. 375, 398-400, 402, 403, 405 of the Criminal Code.

3.2 BELGIAN POLICY FRAMEWORK ON FORCED MARRIAGES

3.2.1 National Action Plan to fight all forms of gender-related violence 2015-2019³⁷

This is the fifth action plan on gender-related violence, and was launched in November 2015. This Action Plan is in line with the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention).

The Action Plan 2015-2019 focuses on partner violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, (so called) honour related violence and sexual violence.

The Plan has six objectives:

- To have an integrated policy regarding the fight against gender-related violence and to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding all forms of violence;
- To prevent violence;
- To protect and support victims;
- To study, continue and adopt protection measures;
- To take into account the gender dimension of the asylum and migration policy;
- To combat violence at international level.

The main guidelines for the national action plan are as follows:

- The expansion and improvement of quality legislation and regulations designed to protect the victims and detection and punishment of the perpetrators;
- The expansion and improvement of the registration and gender statistics;
- Greater attention to a victim-focused, multidisciplinary and integral, holistic approach (the victim and his environment, as well as the children who are exposed to violence);
- Ensuring the protection of victims and a focused outreach approach to people who do not use – for various reasons – existing structures and services;
- More attention to the fight against sexual violence;
- More involvement of new partners (media, private companies, youth associations) and new departments;
- More emphasis on early detection and risk factors;
- Greater attention to primary prevention in collaboration with education;
- More focus on training professionals.

37 Stop Geweld. Nationaal Actieplan ter bestrijding van alle vormen van gendergerelateerd geweld 2015-2019. (Stop Violence. National Action Plan to fight all forms of gender-related violence 2015-2019). https://www.n-va.be/sites/default/files/documents/PDF/persdossier_nationaal_actieplan_ter_bestrijding_van_alle_vormen_van_gendergerelateerd_geweld.pdf

3.2.2 Policy Note on ‘Equal Opportunities’ 2014³⁸

The Policy Note of the Minister for Equal Opportunities in 2014, Joëlle Milquet, tackles the subject of forced marriage. In the framework of the strategy to improve equality between men and women, the note mentions that the Minister for Equal Opportunities has taken on several initiatives:

- The new law of 2 June 2013, as aforementioned, on marriages and cohabitation of convenience, was developed and adopted (published in Belgian Official Gazette [Belgisch Staatsblad] on 23 September 2013).
- The funding of a study in collaboration with the Brussels Capital Region on forced marriage, published in 2013. The study was aimed at contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon.
- The organisation of specific training for civil servants in registry offices, on forced marriage and its warning signs (November 2013).
- Consulates were sensitised regarding the possibility of refusing to issue a consular certificate in case of warning signs of a forced marriage.
- Police services dealing with forced marriages should receive training.
- Together with the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration and the Ministry of Justice, the Minister for Equal Opportunities launched a sensitisation campaign in the autumn of 2013, for the broader public, on forced marriage and marriage of convenience. It is called ‘Wees geen slachtoffer van een schijn of gedwongen huwelijk [Don’t be a victim of a forced marriage or a marriage of convenience] and consists of a website (www.schijnrelatie.be), a short movie of three minutes (www.ibz.be/schijnhuwelijk/#film) and a 30-second television advertisement on forced marriages and marriages of convenience.

38 Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers. *Algemene Beleidsnota Gelijke Kansen* [General Policy Note Equal Opportunities] (Doc 53 3096/011). 6 November 2013.

4

qualitative research
among professionals
on forced marriages
in belgium

4.1 THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM OF FORCED MARRIAGE IN BELGIUM

This chapter explores interview responses regarding available data on the occurrence of forced marriages in Belgium, supplemented by figures provided in previous studies on this subject.

There are no prevalence figures on forced marriages available in Belgium. This was confirmed by some of the respondents. In the past, some attempts were made to grasp the magnitude of the problem of forced marriages in Belgium, but these are limited to specific geographic areas, and/or specific ethnic communities.³⁹ Given that these studies have methodological shortcomings (different population groups, using different methods, etc.), no conclusions can be made regarding the total number of victims, or potential victims, of forced marriage in Belgium. As a result, trends over time are impossible to assess.

Seeing that forced marriages are recognised as a specific crime in the Criminal Code since 2007, data on forced marriages in the judicial system should be registered.⁴⁰ However, one respondent said that cases registered in the judicial system were few:

'Normally, reports to the police are in the database of the police. With respect to the public prosecutors, there is a database of the College of Prosecutors. That is for all criminal offences, as forced marriage is in the Criminal Code, so there are two different databases – they are not identical. Normally, cases should be quite easy to retrieve since 2007 (when the law on forced marriage was adopted), provided that they are coded appropriately. [...] It's true that we did not have many cases, and it might be interesting to see why.'

NGOs and other organisations that work on forced marriage and keep records of their interventions relating to this subject indicate that forced marriage is (highly) present in their area of work.

A project in Mons, the Honour-Related Violence [and] Forced-Marriage Project, a collaboration between the victims' assistance unit of the police and an NGO, has kept records of cases of forced marriage since its creation in 2011. It indicates that since 2011, it has dealt with 20 cases of forced marriage, with nine of those in 2013. The respondents also said that in 2013, cases were reported either directly to the police, by a friend, public social welfare centres, or schools.

39 See, for example:
Surkyn, J. *Het gezins- en waardenonderzoek bij Turkse en Marokkaanse vrouwen in Vlaanderen en Brussel*, Working Paper. *Etnische Minderheden in België* [Study on family and values among Turkish and Moroccan women in Flanders and Belgium] VUB & UGent, 1991 (nr. 3, 17).
Zemni, S., Casier, M. and Peene, N. *Studie naar de factoren die de vrijheid van keuze van een echtgenoot beperken, bij bevolkingsgroepen van vreemde oorsprong van België*, [Study on determinants limiting the choice of a spouse, in population groups of foreign origin of Belgium] Gent/Brussel: UGent/Centrum voor gelijkheid van kansen en racismebestrijding, 2006.
Descheemaker, L., Heyse, P., Wets, J., Clycq, N. and Timmerman, C. *Partnerkeuze en huwelijksluiting van Allochtone mannen. Een kwantitatieve en kwalitatieve analyse van het partnerkeuzeproces en het huwelijk van Marokkaanse, Turkse en sikhmannen* [Partner choice and marriages of foreign men A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the partner choice process and the marriage of Moroccan, Turkish and Sikh men]. Instituut voor de Gelijkheid van Vrouwen en Mannen. Brussels, 2009.
Rea, A. and Bensaid, N. *Rapport relatif à l'étude portant sur les mariages forcés en région de Bruxelles-Capitale*. [Report regarding the study on forced marriage in the Brussels Capital Region] Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2012.

40 These figures have been requested, but have not been received.

A survey conducted in a school in Mons in 2007 also demonstrates that forced marriage is a reality for more than a quarter of its students:

'I have done a survey in [a school for nurses]. Of 260 students, there were 27% who had heard about forced marriage in the family or among friends. It's enormous.'

An NGO employee working with migrant women in Brussels stated that she personally dealt with ten cases of forced marriage in 2013. At the same time, she was also providing advice and taking phone calls on forced marriage, which are not registered. This respondent also indicated that many cases of forced marriages are not registered as such, but are registered as partner violence or intrafamilial violence:

'I receive a lot of telephone calls and a lot of requests for advice on this issue. Some are referred to other organisations and some don't go further, but I cannot always follow up on these situations. [...] Most probably, there are many more cases than the figures actually reflect. What we also witness is that many young girls do not go all the way once they've initiated something – they are too afraid. Some withdraw, some don't know, so we are also somewhat powerless, but what I see is that many cases of forced marriage are not registered as such, as they are often registered under something else. They decide to register it as intrafamilial violence, and not as forced marriage.'

The support team for refugees in one city indicated that it has five to ten cases a year, whereas one NGO (not providing first-line care) indicated that it received five calls regarding 'dramatic forced marriage' situations over a period of four years.

A number of respondents indicated that what is registered as forced marriage is only the tip of the iceberg, and that the issue is underreported.

'Weekly, we have someone who is threatened to marry and who has to deal with partner violence as a consequence. [...] I believe it is much more prevalent than we all think, but that is just the same as with partner violence – it occurs much more than we know. [...] I'm convinced we only see a minority of the victims in our service.'

In 2013, a shelter for abused women registered two child marriages, six arranged marriages, one forced marriage and one threat of forced marriage. In 2012, 26 of the 57 women in the shelter were in arranged marriages. Issues relating to arranged marriage seem to be more common than forced marriage. This was indicated by one respondent, who stated that forced marriage is not as prevalent as arranged marriage, for example, there are ten cases of forced marriage compared to 30 cases of arranged marriage per year. Another respondent indicated that in his/her centre for general welfare, s/he mostly encounters arranged marriages:

'I do not really have a percentage on the people we help with forced or arranged marriage. Arranged marriages are many – about 60% – but people have no problem with this, so service delivery is not necessary here.'

Respondents working with the Roma community indicated that most marriages concluded therein are arranged, and all of them are child marriages. For example, out of the 60 families that these respondents monitor, five families had an imported bride who was also a minor.

Respondents confirmed that forced marriage is rare:

Most marriages in the Roma community are arranged marriages. [...] In one year, I did not receive any requests to help people with forced marriages, but after they married, I heard that the spouses had not been informed about the upcoming marriage.'

Finally, a special unit on forced marriage in a Brussels neighbourhood witnessed a small increase in the number of victims and explained why the number of complaints to the police remains low:

'I've been with the police for 15 years, and in the past six years I've been working for the forced-marriage unit in an area in Brussels. In the beginning, I never heard of forced marriage. To me, it was something far off. It all began with the complaint of one girl, and I started to broaden my knowledge on it. I asked permission from my boss to start a special unit, and that's how it began. In the beginning, I had one complaint. Now we have about eight [people] who've filed a complaint – not very many, I know, but we have to start somewhere. [...] A lot of these forced marriages are categorised as marriages of convenience, intrafamilial violence, etc. That is the easiest thing. Forced marriages are considered a "dirty thing" for many, so we support organisations, other police services, lawyers, victims, etc.'

4.2 THE PROBLEM WITH DEFINING FORCED MARRIAGE AND ARRANGED MARRIAGE, AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE TWO

This section shares the insights of respondents with regard to defining and classifying forced marriage and arranged marriage.

Not many respondents have a definition of forced marriage on which they can rely when working with the people affected, except for those working in the juridical sector and policymakers, as they refer to the definition as stipulated in the law:

'Well, I'm employed by the police, so I cannot but follow the law when it comes to the definition, and in the Criminal Code, Article 391 sexies, a specific criminalisation was added in 2007 on forced marriages, which says [respondent cites the law literally, as aforementioned].'

Some respondents consider child marriage, i.e. concluded under the age of 18 years, as forced because it involves a child, while others believe that minors can effectively consent to marriage. In the case of child marriage, some respondents thought it was easier to intervene:

'In our family-planning centre, you have to determine what [the marriage] is based on – the history, on what people tell you, if it is or is not problematic. If it is problematic, we intervene. If it is not, we do not intervene, and for marriage among minors, we have the law. The law says it is 18 years, be it in Belgium or in the country of origin, so a marriage concluded before 18, for us, is an illegal marriage. So we can intervene.'

However, in day-to-day practice, defining a forced marriage can be problematic. Making a clear distinction between arranged marriages (not illegal) and forced marriages (illegal) is not always easy, and it is more complex than what is defined by law:

'For me, it is difficult to draw the line between what is forced and what is not, to put a finger on it, because the issue of loyalty is very strong, and youngsters are very susceptible to this, as well as adults. Sometimes, people – at the beginning of the therapy [session] – will tell me that they chose their partner freely, but further on in the process of therapy, people say that actually, they were promised as children to be married by their parents. It was a promise. So this comes up after half a year of therapy, otherwise, no one would have known that the marriage was actually forced. This is sometimes difficult to discover.'

Those working with people affected by forced marriage stipulate that, in order to define the problem, the victim's story is key:

'Definitions have their limitations. What is important for me is to listen to the person who is coming to us, to understand his/her demands. Maybe we will find ourselves within the strict interpretation of the law, or maybe not, but if for that person this is a burden [...] then we will try to see together what can be done.'

Arranged marriages are not necessarily perceived as problematic. Respondents mentioned that often youngsters agree with the choice made by their parents (or others), as they trust their judgment:

'It's a thin line, and there is no guarantee that a marriage will succeed or not. I have met a lot of youngsters who were very grateful because their marriage was arranged because, for them, it meant that their family – father, mother, uncle, aunt – was taking care of them. They feel supported in this because they are often also vulnerable and think that they would not have taken any steps to find a partner, as this is very difficult for them.'

Respondents alluded to indicators that can assist in defining whether or not a marriage is forced. These include:

- If a person has no choice, is imported, has no social network, and/or is isolated:
'For me, a forced marriage is when people are obliged to marry, if they have no choice of their own, who are often imported here, who have no social network whatsoever, and who have to live with the family of the partner with whom they are married, and they find themselves totally isolated here.'
- If the person who marries is harmed in any way:
'I work in a private practice, on my own, so I do not have an official definition. For me, I always look at it from the angle, "What is the possible damage to that person?" So, for me, there can already be a forced marriage when pressure is put on a person, if they say, "It's time you get married." For me, that is already a forced marriage.'
- If girls or boys are sold:
'[In order to define it] I'm going to use a very ugly word, but it is a result of our experience, and that is that girls or boys are sold – because boys are equally involved in a marriage. That is how we have often described it among teachers and colleagues. As a consequence, sometimes girls themselves admitted that they are sold. I see it as a bargain that is concluded.'
- If one of the two persons was forced and put under pressure, be it physical or psychological.

An important element mentioned by many respondents, was that forced and arranged marriages are situated in a spectrum of differing levels of consent, pressure and negotiation space. This continuum can range from absolutely no freedom of choice in refusing the proposed marriage partner (forced), to negotiating the possibilities of partners who are suggested (strongly arranged), to a marriage where both partners consent to the partner who is proposed to them (a fully consented arranged marriage).

Another striking finding from the interviews is that victims' perceptions of their marriage can evolve over time. It might be that an individual has agreed to a marriage in order to be able to migrate, but once in Belgium, the marriage is not what s/he expected or does not turn out to be good (for example, due to violence or the threat of violence in that marriage):

'Some will say, years later, and especially when the marriage is not very good, that they were actually not free, that they were forced, but that they, at the moment of marrying, did not feel it that way. So the perception on what is forced and what is not changes over time due to the positive and negative experiences of that person.'

Some other forms of marriage were also mentioned. One respondent mentioned a particular form of arranged marriage, the 'hasty marriage', concluded when migrants return to their countries of origin for their holidays:

'During holidays, when people with a migrant background return to their countries, to Turkey, to Morocco, youngsters are presented to each other – young boys that live over there, the young girl from here, or the other way around – and this marriage is, generally speaking, concluded very quickly. During the holiday, the meeting is set up, a party is organised, and then the marriage is concluded and a young girl or young boy arrives in Brussels. This is not a forced marriage, it's an arranged marriage [...] but it is a marriage that is not concluded on a solid basis, as the youngsters did not have the time to get to

know each other, and the young boy or girl does not know the life in Brussels. So this marriage very often becomes problematic afterwards, but initially, we cannot qualify it as a forced marriage.'

Another issue that was raised in defining the character of the marriage was the problem of determining if it is a marriage of convenience:

'Marriages of convenience are equally the subject of the Criminal Code, but the categories are blurry, and there is a problem with finding proof.'

One respondent noted that there is a difference in defining forced marriage in Belgium. In Wallonia, forced marriage is regarded as a concept on its own, whereas in Flanders, forced marriage is more often defined as honour-related violence:

'It's a bit difficult to distinguish between forced marriages and honour-related violence. It's true that at policy level, in Flanders, honour-related violence is much more talked about, whereas in the francophone part, people mainly talk about forced marriages, and not so much about honour-related violence, but anyway, dealing with the phenomena is a bit the same.'

One respondent stipulated that it should be taken into consideration that as norms regarding marriage differ in other parts of the world, it is important not to stigmatise communities when trying to define the problem. In this respect, another respondent stated:

'Violence should be punished, but what do you do with definitions that are not OK, or that threaten to exclude people or stigmatise them or criminalise them? It's difficult [...] and I do not have an answer readily available.'

We also asked respondents if they saw forced marriage as a form of gender-related violence or, rather, as interpersonal violence. Some respondents saw it as a form of gender-based violence, while others classified it as interpersonal violence, or believed it was both:

'It is not either gender-based violence or interpersonal violence, it's both. It is not purely gender related, as boys and men are [also] affected, but the interpersonal aspects, the expectations of the environment, and the responsibility for the education of children that is put on mothers makes mothers encourage and discourage certain relationships.'

One respondent mentioned that forced marriage should be considered from different angles, as it is an issue of migration, as well as a gender issue and a sociocultural issue, and s/he suggested using the intersectionality perspective:⁴¹

*'I consider forced marriages as both gender violence and interpersonal violence, definitely when you look at it from an intersectionality perspective. [...] In the so-called "white" women's organisations, gender is often prioritised, but gender affects migrant women differently than "white" women. It is very important to take into consideration the different ordering principles, and those principles will define the position of each on those axes differently.'*⁴²

41 This concept interlinks several aspects of an individual, including gender, ethnicity, racism and discrimination, social division and inequalities, and could be useful in capturing the complexity and diversity of forced marriage, and could help in better translating issues related to forced marriage, to policy and recommendations for service provision.

42 Respondent refers to two axes: the gender axis and the ethnicity axis.

4.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF FORCED AND ARRANGED MARRIAGES⁴³

This section examines stakeholders' perspectives on the characteristics of forced and arranged marriages.

4.3.1 Some characteristics of practising communities

We asked about the **ethnicities** that professionals encounter when it comes to issues relating to forced and arranged marriages. These communities are comprised of Afghan, Albanese, Algerian, Armenian, Bangladeshi, Belgian, Bulgarian Turkish, Chechen, Chinese, Indian, Italian, Kosovan (Roma), Kurdish, Lebanese, Maghrebin, Moroccan, Pakistani, Roma, Russian, Serbian, Sicilian, Thai, Tunisian and Turkish ethnic minorities.

When it comes to **gender**, some professionals mentioned that both boys and girls could be confronted with forced and arranged marriages, while others stated that only girls are forced into marriage. It was, however, mentioned several times that the situation for boys is different than that of girls:

'Especially for men, other things apply. Men have more freedom of choice, they have more rights. More is tolerated from men than from women, so often the women have less freedom of choice.'

With regard to **age**, one respondent noted that girls are sometimes married at 16 or 17 in their countries of origin, and are then brought to Belgium with false documents:

'I had some cases of child marriages, but often papers are falsified so that people appear to be adults when they come here, for example, when the birth certificate has been changed: they were 16 or 14 when they married in countries of origin, but come here under another date of birth.'

The marriage of minors was referred to in Roma and Afghan communities. A respondent detailed that within Roma communities, 18 is already too old to get married. A girl's 'value' decreases with age. When she is 18 and not yet married, the bride price decreases, according to one of the respondents. In addition, it was revealed that girls in Roma communities are engaged at as young as ten to 13 years, followed by marriage at 13 or 14 years.

4.3.2 Decision-makers

In most cases, respondents mentioned that the family, and particularly the parents, were the main 'matchmakers'. One respondent mentioned that mothers play a key role in this:

'If your principal role in life is being a mother, and you have no job or some kind of career, you only have household chores, and your responsibility is the education of the children, then this will be tightly linked with your own identity and your own well-being. And if you are judged on that by your community [...] I think it is something very difficult, on a psychological level, for mothers. It makes them very vulnerable.'

43 As mentioned earlier by respondents, it is difficult to draw the line between forced and arranged marriage, and they should rather be viewed as a continuum ranging from limited pressure (e.g. marriage candidates who are proposed on a regular basis but to whom refusal is possible) to no room at all to refuse or negotiate marriage candidates. As stated by professionals working with people affected by these phenomena, the point of departure is when the person indicates that there is a problem, hence the reason(s) why the analyses do not distinguish clearly between forced marriage or arranged marriage, but rather should be situated in this continuum.

Another respondent alluded to the fact that the influence of parents as matchmakers has diminished within the group of second- and third-generation migrants.

'In the Roma community, parents still play a very important role, but there are cases in which youngsters say that they do not agree, but the majority will resign. We had cases here of youngsters rebelling, who took steps through school or through the unit 'society', and who mentioned they were to be forcefully married, and then police and justice came in. [...] The second generation will still try to choose a partner from their own ethnicity because they hope to safeguard part of their culture, but the children who grow up here [...] I think it's wishful thinking from the parents, but the children are articulate enough. They know their way.'

It was also mentioned that decision-making is influenced by the Internet, and that victims are sometimes lured to Belgium:

'Most of the time, I think it's the parents who arrange the marriage between them, but it also happens that people – from Thailand, for example – get to know each other through the Internet and are lured to Belgium under false pretences, and have to live a totally different life here than they imagined, but they came here by free will.'

4.3.3 Pressure, control and freedom of choice

Pressure, or duress, is key in forced and arranged marriages. During interviews with the stakeholders, some insights were shared about this aspect.

Respondents mentioned that pressure could emanate from the whole community, not only from the family. It might be that pressure also comes from the family in the country of origin. The freedom of choice to refuse a marriage candidate can depend on the characteristics of a family, i.e. whether the family is 'open and modern' or, rather, 'conservative'. So-called 'closed communities' are putting people under pressure to marry:

'Freedom of choice [differs] from one person to another. There are families who are very open and modern, and where a decent dialogue is possible, but there are also families where it's really a monologue, where the father or mother says, "This is the candidate, and you will not find any better. This is with whom you have to cope." [...] It has to do with family structure, regardless of the Turkish, Italian or Moroccan culture, and also what parents are used to'

Pressure is situated on a **continuum of freedom of choice**, and it is sometimes difficult to define whether or not force is involved:

'Some youngsters feel it coming and refuse to go on holiday because they say, "OK, there is no pressure, but I simply do not like it that candidates are proposed every time." Is that pressure? Yes and no. No, because they have the choice to say yes or no, and yes, as they have to deal with it every day.'

The pressure experienced is mostly **psychological**, although physical force is also used in some cases. Duress or pressure might be expressed as a means of controlling a girl, or by the community punishing a family (for example, half of the community not showing up at the wedding of one of the children of a particular family that let their daughter marry someone not accepted by the community). It might also be experienced by youngsters who realise that they will have to break with their family if they continue the relationship with the partner they have chosen:

‘There were a couple of girls who were removed from their families and taken to a shelter, but the girls experienced a lot of stress because of the separation [...] and those girls said, “If I leave now, then I will no longer be a member of the family, then I do not belong to the community any more.” And then they often go back and succumb to their faith, so to speak, because that’s the way it should be, and the parents have experienced it – the grandparents, too.’

Pressure also occurs in cases of inter-ethnic relationships:

‘When you live in a society where Islamophobia is very big, then you create a countermovement – if we are not good enough for you, then you are not good enough for us. These kinds of elements of mutual racism and prejudices also play a role. [...] These are inclusion and exclusion mechanisms that play a role and have an influence on the behaviour of people. We also saw reversed racism – some young women were not welcomed by the Flemish parents of their boyfriends.’

One of the reasons mentioned for putting up with pressure was the **fear of being expelled from the community and family**, and the fact that it is very difficult to leave the safe environment of the family. Therefore, youngsters are scared to act against the family and break with them. Youngsters who have undergone this serve as an example, and as a deterrent:

‘The fact that such things happen is an enormous deterrent for other youngsters to even think about starting a relationship with someone who is not Moroccan or Turkish.’

‘I think there are quite a few youngsters who believe they have the power to break with their family, who do it, but who, after X weeks, regret it and prefer to return to the family cocoon. They need it too much. They are very young, they are poor. [...] To be independent from your family demands a lot of courage and power.’

People also do not want to disappoint parents and scandalise the family’s name. **The aspect of loyalty** is a vital element here:

‘Forced marriage limits the freedom of choice. Pressure can be very subtle, but can be very convincing. One of the main characteristics is loyalty to the family ties and the loyalty conflict. [...] The majority of the cases of forced marriages or arranged marriages find their origin in being stuck between the partner and the family of origin. There is a conflict between the partner they did not choose themselves and the family that proposed the partner. To me, it is obvious that this is a major source of conflict between the man and the woman, but also of internal psychological problems (anxiety, depression). People are stuck between what parents want, what they want, and what their partner wants.’

4.3.4 Reasons for forced marriage and arranged marriage

Respondents disclosed a number of reasons for forced or arranged marriages. These reasons are summarised and further detailed as follows: avoiding dishonour, ‘therapeutic’ reasons, material or financial reasons, residence papers, protection against exterior influences or the protection of one’s own culture, and the care of elders.

Honour

Many respondents mentioned the aspect of **honour**. At the onset of puberty and when the first signs of femininity appear, marrying a girl off preserves the honour of both the girl and her family. In Roma communities, there is a great deal of social pressure to marry young and to accept the proposed partner in order not to dishonour the family. Sometimes, promises regarding marriage are made between families when children are very young. Such promises cannot be broken. One respondent mentioned that a case of honour killing caused more forced marriages in the Indian community:

'We had periods where we experienced more cases of forced marriage. For example, three years ago, an Indian girl was killed here, and because of that killing, a lot of Indian girls were forced to marry because the families were afraid that their daughters were going to do the same [the girl that was killed fell in love with an Indian boy from a different caste]. At that time, we received a lot of questions about that issue.'

Dishonouring the family can be caused by having an inter-ethnic relationship that is not accepted by the parents, or by displaying an attitude that is considered too Western. The family honour is also affected when youngsters go against the family rules, for example, in cases of homosexuality or 'problematic' youngsters (drug abusers, problems at school, criminal history, having had (multiple) relations prior to marriage). In such cases, a **'therapeutic' marriage** is proposed, or imposed, to 'cure' the person and put him or her on the 'right' track again:

'There is freedom of choice, as long as it's a Muslim, or if the person has the same ethnicity, but from the moment it's an inter-ethnic marriage – for example, between an Italian and a Flemish [person] – then it becomes more difficult. Then I notice that a lot of parents are interfering, and that parents think it's not good because they want their grandchildren to have the same religion [...] and so they try to convince the youngsters.'

'The Turkish community is quite closed and relatively small. A girl has a boyfriend, and another one, and a third one, and the latter does not work out either. [...] In the end, her reputation in the community has already been damaged, and then it's often the reality that those girls have to find a partner in Turkey because their reputation is less of an issue over there, or that she – because she has a visa or residence papers – is used as an intermediary to find someone over there. For me, that is also a marriage with limited freedom of choice.'

One respondent mentioned that boys and girls from their respective countries of origin are sometimes perceived as better marriage candidates:

'We noticed that girls had very negative perceptions about boys of the same origin living in Belgium and vice versa, especially among girls: the boys are losers, they do not finish school, they will not be able to support a family, they have no sense of responsibility, especially that, "When I look at my environment, those boys are not serious. They just hang around in gangs."

Financial and material reasons

Marriages are also concluded for **financial and/or material reasons, or for residence papers**. This refers mainly to a marriage that is considered a financial transaction, whereby parents 'sell' girls, as one respondent put it. This has to do with financial difficulties in which families find themselves, whereby parents do not see any other

way out, other than a forced or arranged marriage. A bride price is then seen as a solution to this financial problem. Respondents cited amounts between € 750 and € 10,000:

'A lot of families experience financial difficulties and all the problems this brings about. Traditionally, in a Roma marriage, a bride price should be paid, and the marriage celebration also costs a lot of money. Presents must be given. So, I think, for a family that has difficulties, marrying can be a serious financial burden. I dealt with a family with financial problems, and the grandmother considered that the solution to their financial problems was to sell her granddaughter.'

One respondent mentioned that in order to increase the value of a Roma girl, a physical deficiency (her eye) was operated on. Another respondent remarked that the Kurdish community is very clan oriented, and that marriages are concluded within the same clan in order to protect land and property. Marriages are also concluded to obtain residence permits, and this causes several problems, as respondents pointed out.

Seeing that it is increasingly difficult to enter Belgium, marriages to obtain residence permits are a reality. One respondent mentioned that this is the only way to get to Europe/Belgium for non-EU residents, as economic migration is no longer possible. Marriage is then used deliberately to obtain residence papers. When partners are sought in the home countries, mainly because they are thought to be less emancipated (in the case of girls) or more capable of caring and providing for the family (in the case of boys), youngsters with marriage ambitions often doubt the intentions of someone in their home country, finding it difficult to know whether or not the candidate only wants them for the 'papers'.

Protecting cultural values

Marriages can be imposed to protect one's own values against foreign influences:

'They [the Roma] have good arguments as to why they marry their children by force. They want their daughter and son to marry as soon as possible. They think that we, Western people, have a very loose life, running from one boyfriend or girlfriend to the other. They think this is not permitted. They ask us how we raise our children, "from the age of 15, 16, having one girlfriend after the other, drugs, alcohol". They think this is not acceptable, whereas we think they do not give their children opportunities.'

Marriage among the Roma is therefore seen as a form of protection against 'the others', against a 'hostile outside world', as one respondent put it. Another mentioned that such marriages are concluded to avoid something happening to their girls. This fear is inspired by the paedophilia cases and Catholic Church scandals in Belgium. Parents want to secure their expectations for their girls by arranging or forcing them to marry.

One respondent mentioned that having to give up the daughter that you raised, once she's married, to another family (that of her husband) means that this experience of loss will be even greater if the girl marries someone from another religion or even another socio-economic bracket. Forced and arranged marriages within the same ethnic communities are also concluded to protect their culture and values. Parents might be concerned that their frame of reference, values and language will not be passed on to the next generation(s). In the case of refugees, as one respondent

mentioned, marrying their children to partners from their own community, even against their will, is a means of preserving their culture.

The care of elders

Finally, one respondent mentioned that forced and arranged marriages could also be linked to the care of elders. Senior migrants do not go to residence homes for the elderly, as is common practice in Belgium:

'One thing we [the police] have observed is that more and more women are lured to Belgium in the framework of a forced marriage in order to help the grandparents, to help the family-in-law. Migrants in Belgium grow older, and most of them do not return to their countries of origin. [...] There are no specific institutions for elderly people of migrant origin, so they stay at home, and then, the eldest son, who sometimes has a problematic lifestyle, or not, has to marry a girl from the country of origin. They arrive here and they are a bit like Cinderella [...] sometimes treated like slaves.'

4.3.5 Consequences of forced marriage

The professionals brought up the numerous consequences of forced and arranged marriages. These include psychological problems, early pregnancy, early school-leaving for both boys and girls, financial repercussions, problems with integration, intimate partner violence, extreme isolation, and repudiation from the community. These are examined in more detail, as follows.

Psychological problems

Psychological problems occur when victims find themselves in a marriage that does not work out, and when divorce is not an option. People often remain with the abusive partner so as not to lose their residence permit, seeing that marriage cannot be dissolved in the first three years, according to the current legislative framework. This can lead to a range of problems, including depression, damage to self-esteem, feelings of guilt and shame, and problems with sexuality. The pressure that is put on victims to accept marriage candidates can have serious consequences, affect normal functioning in daily life, and eventually lead to victims breaking under that pressure. Psychological stress or violence in relationships can also lead to suicide, as one professional mentioned:

'I had a case of forced marriage, of a man who was forced by his parents to marry a particular girl, but who was in love with another woman. Besides his marriage, he kept on seeing that woman. He dreamt of a life with her, but he had promised his parents to marry the woman of their choice and wanted to keep that promise. At a certain point in time, he felt trapped because of his divided loyalty to the different parties, and he became chronically suicidal. The only way out that he saw was death.'

Isolation

Situations of (extreme) isolation were identified in women and men who migrated to Belgium for marriage and were completely isolated from Belgian society. Often, they are not prepared for the radically different lifestyle and habits of the partner. This can result in isolation, and even violence. Isolation and loneliness were also noted after divorce, due to a lack of social networks. The aspect of isolation was also mentioned in the provision of care, when there is no follow-up once a girl turns 18. These girls find themselves in total isolation, as they no longer have a network in the community:

'We see more and more women who have never left their homes and who, after several years, find themselves thrown out on the street. They come to the police station, for example, we had a woman who was in Belgium for three years, but she did not even know where she lived. All of a sudden, her husband threw her out of the house. She could not tell us her address.'

Violence

Violence is one of the issues often mentioned as a consequence of forced and arranged marriages:

'I had a case of an Afghan woman who had to marry at 16, with an Afghan man who lived here for many years. Apparently, the family of the man was very influential in Afghanistan, so the woman came here at the age of 16 with false documents – her marriage certificate and birth certificate were falsified. There was severe partner violence and child abuse in that marriage. She had a number of miscarriages due to her husband. She sought help and provided evidence, but she did not want to report to the police because she and her family were threatened. The family of the woman in Afghanistan was severely threatened, even physically, for example, her mother was stabbed with a knife. Her husband said that if she ever told someone about what happened in his house, he would make sure that her family in Afghanistan was going to be harmed. He is also trying very hard to get her back to Afghanistan, but she knows that if she goes back, she will be labelled as a very bad woman.'

In many cases, such marriages are not concluded on a solid basis and the marriage becomes problematic, leading to (threats of) violence and intimate partner violence. Sometimes, partners are ignorant of the difficulties, relationships or children from the past of the partner in Belgium, which can lead to violence. Differences in education, norms and values regarding parenthood and how to raise children can cause struggles between a partner born and raised in Belgium and a partner from the country of origin.

One professional stated that when there are migration problems, marriage troubles undoubtedly follow. Expectations and promises that were agreed upon prior to the marriage are not met, which can lead to intimate partner violence. Moreover, partners from abroad are often in a much weaker position than the partner from Belgium, as the latter knows the language, already has a residence permit, and knows his/her way in Belgian society. Violence was also noted among minor Roma girls, who enter into the family of the husband. They are abused, must do all the difficult physical and dirty work, do not have the opportunity to use contraception, and have to obey the elder women in the family:

'Once they are married, they enter the family of the man. The one who arrives, the last in that family, has to do the work. So this girl was very good in our school, she knew the [Dutch] language very well, she was a girl with a future, and she was forced to marry, and then she was very much abused in that family. She had to do all the dirty work, really heavy work. She got pregnant immediately, as she did not have the chance to use contraception.'

Extreme expressions of violence include the threat of murder, as well as being expelled from the community. Cases in which the victim's life was threatened were mentioned by a professional who works with the Indian community:

'Women who fear they will be forced to marry or who fear for their life are welcomed in our shelter. It's closely related to honour violence and honour killings, but it strongly depends from community to community. Especially in the Indian culture, women really fear for their lives, and then they seek shelter.'

Being expelled by the community was recounted more often. Refusing a marriage, in particular, incurs a heavy emotional burden: one is seen as dirty, less valued by the family and the community, and it leads to expulsion from the community. This is the case among the Roma. One professional stated that it is really difficult to take any juridical steps in cases of forced marriage, as the victims are expelled from their community and end up quite isolated:

'When asked what women would think if their daughters would come home with a non-Muslim, a lot of these women said they would no longer talk to their daughter, and that they would break all contact for years, in order to avoid shame by the community. These are real dramas.'

Migration and integration issues

Marriages concluded between a partner who lives in Belgium and a partner who is migrating from a home country can work out, but can also cause problems due to issues related to migration and integration:

'The marriage is concluded quickly, and not on a solid basis, so the partners do not really know each other very well. When one partner migrates, this poses issues relating to integration. This person might have imagined his or her life differently, and this all might burden a marriage, and this pressure can be expressed through violence.'

The person migrating to Belgium could face racism and discrimination, a lack of job opportunities, and/or poor labour conditions, any of which can cause disappointment and homesickness.

Early school-leaving and early pregnancy

Early school drop out within the Roma community was one of the problems mentioned. Marriages are concluded in a traditional way, at a young age (before the age of 15). Once married, girls and boys drop out of school. The girls have two to four children and need to take care of them. As a result, they have no time to go to school. Girls also know this, and they do not see the point of attending school if they are to marry in a few years' time, with the care of the family and household on their shoulders. Boys also drop out of school because, as the man of the house, they have to provide money and have to work:

'In the Roma community, it is a problem that when they marry, they do not go to school. Girls are kept at home, especially those coming from abroad. Sometimes, girls who attended school for eight or nine years and who get married drop out of school. This is really not good for the future generation. It's a waste of time. Everything we do in schools is somewhat lost when girls remain at home after they marry.'

Early pregnancy is closely associated to early school drop out within child marriages. Professionals also mentioned cases in which minor brides, upon arrival in Belgium, get pregnant immediately in order to obtain their residence permit more rapidly (if they have a baby).

Financial problems

Financial issues relating to forced or arranged marriages cannot be underestimated. Especially when a bride price is involved, it puts a serious financial burden on partners to remain married. On the other hand, the bride price can also help solve financial problems in a family. Such financial issues can cause considerable stress:

'For example, in the case of a man, he can take out a big loan in order to marry because a bride price is often paid in cash, or gold has to be bought for the marriage, so it concerns thousands of euro. Sometimes, the family in rural areas has sold land for this, as collateral for the loan, so the marriage is an investment for the whole family. On top of that, the man is not prepared for life in Belgium. There is pressure to pay back that money as soon as possible. He has to find a job quickly. So there is financial pressure, the expectations of the family, the obligations that it brings about.'

4.3.6 Escaping a (threat of) forced marriage and coping mechanisms

There is, of course, the option to **submit a complaint to the police**, after which point a woman could be **referred to a shelter**.

Most respondents, however, mentioned **divorce** as a way out, and several issues relating to divorce were brought to the forefront. In Roma communities, divorce is not an option. Issues relating to honour and the bride price prevent people from divorcing. Another aspect that hinders divorce is that those who enter Belgium within the framework of a marriage must remain married for three years. This means that they have to endure the situation before they can request a divorce. When the marriage is abusive, respondents – understandably – consider it problematic:

'Most of the time, girls accept the situation, and accept a candidate. They try to endure the situation for two to three years, after which, they request a divorce. In this way, they have the advantage of living in a Western society, they obey their parents, the family honour is saved, and the honour of the girl is preserved. That's what people tell these girls, but most of the time, by the time they can divorce, they have three children and the husband is abusive. Getting out of such a marriage is not that simple. [...] Moreover, after the divorce, a finger is going to be pointed at the woman because she's the one who divorced.'

One way of escaping the threat of forced marriage is by **refusing to go on holiday** to the countries of origin in order to avoid pressure to accept marriage candidates. One respondent also mentioned **prolonging schooling** by deliberately failing exams as a way out. This offers the girl the opportunity to mature so that she is in a stronger position to withstand family pressure.

Among the Roma, **abduction** is sometimes used to escape a forced marriage. This happens among youngsters who want to be in a relationship that is not accepted by their parents/family. The girl is abducted by the boy, and as the community/family assumes that she is no longer a virgin, the youngsters can get married, as the girl's value has been damaged.

'We dealt with a Roma family where promises had been made to marry off their children, but the children tried to stop it through abduction. We hear that more often from the age of 15 years onwards. In the Roma community, a girl can be abducted by a boy. They have to try to stay away for a couple of days and then the family considers that the girl is no longer a virgin. When she returns, the family allows the marriage to go through to safeguard the honour of the family.'

One respondent mentioned that opportunities to escape or to cope are better for men than for women:

'As the honour of the family passes through the woman, the woman must walk the straight and narrow, whereas a man can have a double life beside his arranged marriage. [...] So men complain less, as they know they can have a life alongside their marriage without this causing too much of a problem.'

Psychotherapy seems to offer valuable support in coping with psychological problems due to a forced or arranged marriage, for both men and women:

'It's certainly advisable that people receive psychotherapy in their mother tongue. In 90% of the cases in my practice, it's related to marital problems – not many cases regarding an upcoming marriage, but more cases of people who have been married for a couple of years, cases of arranged marriages and marriages with partners from home countries who are experiencing problems due to differences in norms and values regarding the education of children, differences in how they were raised. [...] I have people who divorce and end up being very lonely. When they arrive here due to migration, they don't have their own network. After divorce, they are expelled from the community and experience detrimental psychological problems. [...] I also witness a lot of single mothers who have difficulties because they are not remarried. [...] It's remarkable to me that people are surprised that there is a possibility to act with respect for their family, but also with respect for themselves. It is really possible to find a way out.'

4.3.7 Trends

We asked respondents if they had any indications that forced marriage or arranged marriage had changed over time. Positive and negative trends were both mentioned.

Positive changes

The most apparent change that was mentioned was a notable **difference between first- and second- /third-generation migrants**, in terms of more scope to negotiate, more freedom to choose the marriage partner, and more openness to discussing the issue.

One respondent stated that the migration context and society have changed considerably over the last ten years, and that the social mobility of Turkish and Moroccan communities is much more advanced than that of the newly arrived migrants, such as those from Chechnya, Pakistan or Albania. For that reason, there is more openness to discussing these issues, including inter-ethnic marriages, among Turkish and Moroccan communities. The Turkish and Moroccan migrants of the first generation were often illiterate, whereas the second and third generation went to school. This factor – education – gives more scope for negotiation regarding inter-ethnic marriages. Another respondent confirmed this:

'Some families among the Turkish community obtained degrees in higher education and have climbed the social ladder. They belong to the middle class. They want to get rid of the interference of their environment, and they move to the suburbs, just outside the city, where they live in a mixed environment – and where they can do what they want as a nuclear family.'

This evolution, from a traditional family towards a nuclear family, which focuses on its members' own needs and desires, and in which marriage partners are equal, was brought up again by another professional. Concerning the Roma, one respondent mentioned that Roma born in Belgium have more freedom of choice, and that some girls stay in secondary school and get married at a later age.

A second, important, positive change is that there is **more openness** regarding forced and arranged marriage. This is reflected in the increasing requests for support and information. One respondent believed that because people are more open and have learned from the past regarding migration and marriage, there is more freedom of choice, and youngsters oppose family pressure more often and have more knowledge about what to do in such cases, for example, going to the police.

The fact that the helpline 1712 exists is also considered a factor that makes psychological violence more visible, including violence linked to forced and arranged marriages. Even at policy level, forced marriage seems to be on the agenda, as one respondent stated by referring to the specific chapter on forced marriage in the National Action Plan, and the increasing number of initiatives taken. However, one respondent claimed that such attention only comes after dramatic events:

'These issues have always existed, and suddenly they are on the agenda. It's the same with domestic violence that was discovered ten years ago. It's horrible, but it's the way it is. It's the political agendas and it is how our society functions that determine which issues are prioritised.'

Because of the increasing openness within the Turkish community, **more men find their way to psychotherapy** with problems relating to marriage, amongst others. The role of the media (the Turkish media in Turkey) in breaking the taboo surrounding seeking help when experiencing psychological problems is crucial:

'I do see a change in my [psychotherapy] practice. For example, in the beginning, mainly women came, and nowadays, very often, men feel the need to talk because they find it difficult to tackle certain subjects in their own network. I also see a change in the Turkish culture in Turkey, as well as here, to the extent that it is less and less a taboo to go to a psychologist, a psychotherapist. I do see that the media plays a major role in this. It is a very media-centred culture, and people watch a lot of TV, and in talk shows, you see psychologists. In radio programmes, you can call a psychologist to ask a question. [...] It's less of a taboo now.'

Changes in the characteristics of forced marriage are also occurring, as noted by several respondents. The ages at which marriages are concluded seem to be slightly increasing among the Roma, although forced marriage remains common in this community. In the Turkish community, however, there is a trend towards more arranged marriages and fewer forced marriages. Other changes include the slow recognition that services and communities need to collaborate, and the fact that women in abusive relationships are increasingly being supported by their families to leave their abusive

husbands. In some Roma communities, respondents saw a positive trend regarding school-related issues. More parents come to the contact moments organised by the school, and there are fewer absences.

One respondent stated that there is an **evolution going on in the Roma community**:

'With regard to freedom of choice, there is an evolution among the Roma community. There was a case of parents who had to go to the police for marrying off their children. This was a strong signal to the rest of the community. The other parents definitely do not want to find themselves in that same situation, to have to go to the police, to court, to justify themselves, and they are very afraid that their children will be taken away. That is their greatest fear.'

Negative trends

Negative trends were also mentioned. The **right-wing discourse** in Belgium, which has been gaining more attention over the past few years, has not helped to solve the problem. Contrary to what is written in the previous section, some respondents even noticed an **upward trend in the number of cases** in the past ten years, as well as an increase in pressure on youngsters:

'I have the impression that the issue of pressure on youngsters by families is increasing, at least according to what they tell us. Often, when we carry out sensitisation activities, there are 20 youngsters between 15 and 18 years, and we ask them, "If you had to marry tomorrow, would you be able to choose the partner you want, or would you have to argue with your parents?" And many of them tell us that they would have to argue with their parents.'

One respondent noticed differences between the first, second and third generations of migrants when it comes to marriage:

The first and second generation belong to a closed-community structure, where respect for the family is vital and marriages are concluded based on that respect. [...] Many of these marriages were 'collective', i.e. grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles all living together [...] but nowadays, when it concerns marriages for migration, there is this "dream of Belgium" in countries of origin, whereas here, in Belgium, they have a "deep-freeze mentality", as if everyone in the countries of origin still lives in that closed-community structure, with that respect for the family, and here, in Belgium, all daughters are whores and all sons are trash because they want their children to marry someone from the countries of origin.'

Finally, a negative trend was noted among the civil services in municipalities. In earlier days, these services were ignorant of issues relating to marriages of convenience, whereas nowadays there is a trend towards non-recognition of any marriage, based on false or wrong assumptions that the marriage is suspicious.

'There is another aspect at civil/state level that is very important, and which is very recent. It concerns the attitudes of the civil services in municipalities, who haven't dealt with this issue in the past. Now it has become total madness at times. In certain cases, these services refuse to acknowledge a marriage in Belgium if they consider, be it wrong or right, that there are certain suspicions of a marriage of convenience in which the two are involved, or that one is trying to get the other one over here.'

4.4 HOW FORCED AND ARRANGED MARRIAGES ARE DEALT WITH IN BELGIUM: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STAKEHOLDERS' WORK

This section provides insight into the work of stakeholders dealing with forced and arranged marriages, particularly relating to prevention, protection, prosecution, provision of services, policymaking and research. Three other aspects of particular importance are also highlighted: the reporting of cases, the feelings and attitudes of stakeholders, and the importance of partnerships.

4.4.1 Prevention

The prevention of forced marriage focuses on several aspects: **sensitisation**, capacity-building of professionals as well as victims, outreach, the provision of advice and referral, mediation, financial measures, and social networks. Each of these issues is explored in more detail, as follows.

One of the main activities in the prevention of forced marriage is sensitisation. This is mainly done by spreading information through posters, flyers, websites, colloquia, documentaries and films (for example, a documentary made by the Turkish community about people who migrated to Belgium for marriage), a theatrical play, an educational toolkit (*Marriage Return Ticket: Brussels-Turkey*), brochures (for example, *Holiday Time, Marriage Time*), etc.

'We created a theatrical play that explored arranged marriage in the Belgian community, in the aristocracy. This was a setting where arranged marriage occurred frequently, as there was the issue of the family property, and that is why meetings were organised among youngsters of aristocratic families, balls were organised. [...] We tried to broaden the debate and not to stigmatise migrants by stating that it is always youngsters of migrant origin who are confronted with this. It happened in our history, too, and it still exists, so we wanted to stimulate the debate within communities with this play.'

Target groups for sensitisation efforts include schools, newly arrived migrants, and the police/magistrates.

- Sensitisation in schools is preferably organised before the school holidays. One initiative provides sensitisation on partner choice, on recognising pressure and providing mechanisms to deal with it. Another project explores marriage migration, communication, sexuality, etc., and is targeted towards youngsters, couples and individuals. In a school in a Flemish city, a particular project was organised for 11- to 12-year-olds in order to sensitise them about marriage, relationships, and free choice of partner. In that project, all stakeholders received training, support for pupils was provided, and referrals were done when necessary.
- One respondent mentioned that the assimilation course provided to **newly arrived migrants** is necessary, in order to provide information on organisations dealing with marriage issues.
- Information is also provided to **police officers and magistrates**, to inform them about the issue of forced marriage.

Two respondents suggested **capacity-building** aimed at professionals. For the past few years, one city in particular provided capacity-building on forced marriage for police officers. A training manual was developed to accompany the course. Another respondent mentioned that they tried to provide a framework in which service providers can operate:

'There is a right-wing discourse around the issue of marriage and migration. [...] We are astonished during meetings about the very right-wing, extreme-right way that civil servants and others discuss this. [...] This is not really solving the problem. Of course, abuse should be tackled – violence, definitely – but the bottom line is left untouched, and that is what we try to do. We work with groups, with service providers, with empowering people, trying to show them and to explain that these are the boundaries, the legal framework in which we have to live and work, and that is not easy, as it is a private matter.'

Outreach, especially to the Roma community, was mentioned as a way of building trust with this community, with particular families, which is much needed in order to raise issues relating to the school attendance of Roma children. It is very difficult for youngsters to attend school once they are married and have children, but outreach workers try to motivate parents to send their children (mainly girls) to school, at least for a couple of weeks or at regular intervals. They also try to find alternatives to get these children to school. One respondent mentioned, however, that the issue of forced marriage is not really taken up:

'We are keeping out of this, at the moment, I think. It is really a family business. Personally, I think that marriage is not really a problem. Of course, I do not know the opinion of the girls. Our problem, in our line of work, is the fact that they do not attend school. That is much more important to us. [...] We try to pass on the message that it is important to provide a better future for their children by letting them attend school, so that they have the option of continuing their education, finding a job, etc., but I think we still have a long way to go. [...] Other organisations say that we have done so much in the past to try to diminish that problem [forced marriage] without results, so maybe we need to focus more on small children. Everyone sees education as the key to the future.'

Mediation within communities is often used as a strategy. It is done, for example, by the police, teachers (equal-opportunity teachers) or cultural mediators towards parents, or via the family, the imam, or a person trusted by the victim.

Another way of dealing with the high school absenteeism of Roma children was the **withdrawal of study bursaries or other financial advantages**. Although this did have an effect on non-authorized absences from school among the Roma, making parents pay back study bursaries was also problematic.

'For non-authorized absences from school, we collaborated with the police. If there were several non-authorized absences, the file was sent to the police and the police made a house call. The uniform made some kind of impression, but it did not have a lot of impact because they only received a warning. The measure that did have an impact – I believe it was an initiative by Pascal Smet – was the withdrawal of study bursaries, or the reimbursement of bursaries in the case of too many absences. This had an influence, yes. So, after a certain number of warnings, the files were sent to the Ministry of Education, who then sent out letters that bursaries had to be paid back, but the bursary was already paid and the reimbursement was a big problem, seeing that they have large families and most of the time, the money was already spent.'

Another measure (although not often used, according to the respondent) was making support from the municipal social-service department conditional, i.e. that financial support would only be provided if the children attended school.

The **violence helpline 1712** is considered too new to draw any conclusions. According to a respondent, it is not yet sufficiently profiled, however, because it has a low threshold, reports are coming in from the Afghan community. (Migrants who are more integrated know their way to other services much better than members of the Afghan community.) However, another respondent thought that this helpline, despite its low threshold, was not yet specialised in multicultural issues.

When victims contact services, **advice, counselling and**, if necessary, further **referrals** are provided. Information is offered on the rights of the victim and the (dis)advantages and risks of each possible step when considering the refusal of a marriage.

4.4.2 Protection

In protecting victims of forced and arranged marriage, respondents thought that police, shelters, and schools and teachers play a key role. The police force in a city in Wallonia (Mons) has extensive experience in dealing with forced marriage, and it pays particular attention to genuinely life-threatening situations in cases thereof:

‘When a girl comes to the police, the actions we will undertake are quite similar to those of victims in general, and to victims of intrafamilial violence or intimate partner violence. However, we do pay particular attention because we know there is a real life-threatening situation. In other cases, this is not so apparent. [...] There is a specific procedure that allows us to know when we need to activate the unit for assistance to victims. In cases of intrafamilial violence or interpersonal violence or other situations, colleagues will wait to fax us a paper asking us to get in touch with certain people, whereas in the case of forced marriage, they have to call the service immediately. [...] This is the flow chart for police officers, and this means that even if a person calls 101 and has the dispatcher on the phone, based on key words that have been encoded in the information system, the operator can decode it and the procedure will appear on the screen so that we know what to do in these situations.’

Two respondents mentioned that such **special police units** also exist in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels, where there are reference personnel who have received special training on these issues.

Shelters also provide protection, such as in the case of intrafamilial violence. Women are given a security plan if necessary, or a personal alarm system can be installed on their phone at home if certain criteria are met.

Schools and teachers also play a role in protecting victims. One respondent mentioned that schools and the police collaborate on issues relating to forced marriage. Another respondent mentioned that there are warning signs to which one can be vigilant and that function as indicators, for example, when the behaviour of a child changes, when a girl is being more controlled and is not showing up for activities like she used to do, or when a woman is beaten up a lot but keeps going back to her husband, or if a woman is not going out. One respondent noted, however, that before going to the police, victims initially seek protection from close relatives, in Belgium or in their countries of origin.

Possible protective measures brought up by respondents include putting minors in institutions and referring (potential) victims to specialised organisations or shelters for abused women. One respondent mentioned that working with minors is similar to working with adults when it concerns forced marriage: the issue is complex, and there is a need to analyse on a case-by-case basis. However, if minors are involved, the need to take protective measures might occur, even if there are no sufficient juridical elements by which to punish the parents.

One respondent mentioned that s/he developed a protocol for cases of forced marriage:

'I made this protocol following a case where I ran into a brick wall time and time again: the police did not want to cooperate, people did not know the rights of the victim, there were genuine threats to the life of minors, who needed to be referred. [...] On the basis of all the information I collected at that time, we created a protocol. We also made a brochure for youngsters who fear being taken abroad to be married. In that brochure, youngsters are provided with information to make certain agreements with a person of trust. For example, when the youngster is going abroad and he or she does not get in touch with the person of trust any more, or if he or she calls and speaks a code word, then this is the signal that a procedure should be initiated in Belgium.'

Reports of forced and arranged marriages come from schools, the police, social workers, teachers, family and friends, welfare departments, centres for pupils' counselling, care providers and health services. Many respondents agreed that victims seldom report cases of forced marriage. It is difficult for victims because, although they do not agree with their parents, they remain loyal, and this loyalty conflict makes it very difficult for them to denounce their parents or family and to make a formal complaint.

Prosecution

In cases of forced marriage, juridical proceedings can be instigated. Victims can report to the police, although respondents stated that this is not often the case, as aforementioned. When a forced marriage is reported, an official report is made and the prosecutor is informed. Court cases might be initiated, and legal actions might include imprisonment or conditional freedom. Evidence is often provided on the basis of assault and harassment, as this is much easier to prove. Depending on the situation, the judge might suggest a divorce, or in violent situations, the victim might demand recognition for that violence.

In Brussels, a special forced-marriage unit in the police has been in operation for six years. This unit deals with a very mixed ethnic population (150 nationalities) in a deprived area of the city. The unit is confronted with the most poignant situations. Also, once the police hear about a forced marriage, it is often too late to stop it, as the victim might be abroad and her papers taken from her, or the victim has no money, is isolated and controlled, terrified of her in-laws as well as her own family, becomes pregnant quickly and is often abused.

'Our first case involved a girl who realised that the marriage was forced, and that the marriage took everything from her. She loved to give dancing classes to children, but all of sudden, she wasn't allowed to do that any more. Her fiancé did not want her to leave the house, so her family locked her up, as they were already promised to each other. In that scenario, we cannot do anything any more. When we [the special police/forced-marriage unit] hear about a forced marriage, it is often too late. Identity documents have been taken away. They leave for a trip abroad, and when the girl calls us, we have to tell her she cannot do anything without her documents. She then has to go to the embassy, but that takes time and money, which she does not have. [...] Don't forget, she's all alone! [...] Another case involved a girl who was not allowed to leave the house any more once she was married. She became pregnant within three months, and then we got a call about domestic violence and she had bruises all over. That hurts. [...] She did not want to make a complaint because she was terrified of her in-laws and her family.'

In addition, the special police/forced-marriage unit provides support to organisations and other police departments, offers (telephone) advice to lawyers, victims and police officers as well as organisations, and provides information to schools and prosecutors. Another respondent mentioned that his/her organisation provides support for victims during legal proceedings, such as finding a lawyer and accompanying the victim to court.

4.4.3 Provision of services

When asked about the services provided, respondents shared insights into their work with victims, on shelters, mediation, referrals, reporting, training and sensitisation.

Working with victims: One respondent from an NGO mentioned that it was one of the few organisations that follows up and provides long-term support for victims. Its work consists of an extensive intake conversation to assess the situation, the needs of the victim, how the family is functioning, and to evaluate the risk and danger of a particular situation. A vital element in this work is the dialogue with the victim, to discuss the situation, the options and consequences of each option (for example, breaking with the family or not). Psychological and social support is also provided, for example, support in dealing with financial difficulties, with the divorce process, with juridical issues, with finding a job, etc. If necessary, victims are referred to other services or shelters, or housing is provided.

One respondent provides psychotherapy in the victims' native language (Turkish). In cases of marital problems (the majority of patients), the therapy treats the damage done by forced or arranged marriages, such as loss of self-confidence, feelings of guilt and shame, how to face failures in life and its financial consequences, sexuality problems, etc. The fact that this therapy is provided in the mother tongue of the patients is very important, according to this respondent.

The use of peers in working with victims and communities was used successfully as a strategy in Ghent. Women who were former victims are now experienced experts who assist victims in making decisions. These peers are highly credible from the victims' point of view. They are role models because they demonstrate that a stable life is possible, even after choosing their own partner.

Mediation: This is utilised by many of the respondents who deal with victims. However, respondents use it with caution. Mediation will depend on the situation, and as a strategy, it can work, even in cases of resistance to inter-ethnic marriages because of the low threshold for people seeking help. However, a respondent pointed out that one must remain vigilant, so as not to cause the opposite effect. Most of the time, youngsters do not ask for mediation. Seeing that it is considered paramount to always proceed based on the needs and requests of the victim, mediation should not be done when the victim does not want it. Another respondent endorsed this, and said that individuals should never be persuaded to engage in mediation when they do not wish to. Options and consequences should be explored, and framed in a human-rights context.

'If we are in a situation of violence, I am not in favour of mediation. For me, mediation must be a balanced dialogue between parties, and when we talk about violence, and especially if we are in a continuum of violence, I do not think that this is the path to choose.'

Shelters for abused women and their children receive victims of forced and arranged marriages. According to a respondent, the work is the same for all clients, regardless of whether they are victim of forced marriage or not. Shelters provide support for a maximum of three months, according to a respondent. The services provided therein include mediation, couples' counselling, socio-psychological counselling, providing a security plan for women and children, assisting in reintegration and working with children.

A few respondents mentioned **training**. This comprises training for schools, the police, support services and municipal officials who are confronted with forced marriage. One respondent mentioned that at policy level, it was decided that all municipal officers who could potentially be confronted with forced marriage should receive training.

One respondent stated that the **reintegration of victims**, after seeking help to escape a forced marriage, is non-existent in Belgium. Another said:

'Before we can reintegrate victims, victims need to be identified and protected, and we need to reflect on how this can be done in the best way, with what budget, and in which cases.'

Others identified reintegration initiatives such as referrals to appropriate organisations or services (for example, financial monitoring, housing under monitoring), following up with a victim when she is referred to a shelter, encouraging victims to undertake Dutch-language and social-orientation classes, and reintegration into the family through mediation and follow-up.

4.4.4 Partnerships

Partnerships have been built to share knowledge and expertise, both at international and national levels, and also among professionals when dealing with individual cases.

Experiences, successes and difficulties have been shared with organisations from abroad. For example, one respondent said:

'I went to a colloquium organised by Réseau Mariage et Migration that was really interesting, seeing that there were many people from abroad. For example, someone from the Forced Marriage Unit in the UK explained how they worked. Belgium could not work like that, particularly regarding the repatriation of victims to Pakistan. The UK is an ancient colonial power and they can accomplish certain things, whereas we cannot. Then there was a person from Berlin, from Papaya, who shared their experiences, their problems. Another interesting thing was that the French participants shared their experiences with developing a system of sheltering victims within families.'

Working together on cases of forced marriage creates bonds of trust and knowledge among professionals and the other stakeholders involved, and it will help to identify the objectives that have to be reached, according to a respondent.

Another respondent mentioned the critical role of equal-opportunity teachers, who have regular meetings with other stakeholders, such as social workers, school directors, and centres for pupils' counselling, to discuss cases of children who are absent from school and to decide if home visits are necessary. These teachers also collaborate with the police when there are too many cases of absenteeism.

4.4.5 Policymaking

Two respondents involved in policymaking mentioned that the following activities took place in the area of forced marriage: responding to parliamentary questions on forced marriage (very few), implementation of government policy (for example, the National Action Plan), providing subsidies for local sensitisation projects, evaluating and testing policy initiatives, and centralising all information.

Again, one respondent stressed the different realities in Flanders and Wallonia when working with victims. In Flanders, contacting services is easy, through the centres for general welfare, whereas in Wallonia, it depends on the provincial coordinators. Another respondent mentioned the existence of an action plan in Brussels that deals with training programmes for professionals who interact with victims of forced and arranged marriages.

4.4.6 Research

Respondents mentioned a number of research studies on the subject of forced marriage that were carried out in the past, as well as an upcoming study that will evaluate the specific law on forced marriage, specifically to assess whether or not the specific criminal law influences people's decisions.

4.4.7 Feelings of stakeholders

Some professionals mentioned **feelings of powerlessness, disappointment and fear when dealing with forced marriage**. They feel powerless because, in the end, the choice remains with the victim to return to the family/husband or not. Disappointment sets in when a girl is forced to marry despite the work that the professionals have done. Fear was also mentioned, as forced marriage involves life-threatening situations:

'In such cases, you are a bit powerless. That is the case with all forms of partner violence. It remains the choice of the one sitting in front of you, to follow you or not. [...] We have to deal with questions such as, "Should we report to the police or the prosecutor?" or "Are we not jeopardising her security?" To what extent are we also responsible for the eventual death of someone? It is really very hard to consider what to do.'

One respondent working with victims in Brussels said that social workers **often do not act, out of fear of doing something wrong, out of respect for culture, or because they do not know what to do because they lack confidence:**

'The difficulty that I encountered is the fear of doing wrong among many social workers. It is good to ask questions, but it is not because you have a situation of forced marriage, because you have these young girls from foreign origin, that many do not know how to intervene. I tell them, "Act as you would do with any type of violence." Of course, the family context can have consequences or aggravate the situation, but I do not understand why they hesitate so much. They – I'm sorry to say so – "racialise" the question too much. [...] When it comes to minors, you have to look at the well-being of the young girl, what is best for her, and not put yourself in the family's point of view.'

Another respondent referred to **stereotypes** among some professionals about other cultures that influence service provision. It was also mentioned that the relationship of trust with the victim and issues relating to **professional secrecy** make it difficult to act.

4.5 FACTORS INCREASING THE RISK OF FORCED MARRIAGE

Stakeholders were asked if they could identify factors that increase or decrease the risk of a forced or arranged marriage. The answers can be categorised by factors associated with the characteristics of families and communities, individuals, service provision, and context. These are explored in more detail, as follows.

4.5.1 Factors associated with families and communities

Some respondents mentioned that **ethnicity** is a risk factor. Some ethnic communities are more at risk than others. In the Indian community, there is enormous community pressure and control, whereas in the Moroccan community, only the Berber region is affected by this practice.

Some stakeholders identified **financial difficulties** as a factor that can increase the risk of forced or arranged marriage. This was mentioned in scenarios where women are 'sold' by their parents for financial profits, or among communities where a **bride price** is common practice (for example, Roma communities). Financial difficulties are thought to increase the willingness to marry off girls in order to receive a bride price.

The **lack of gender equality** in some families and communities was also considered a risk factor, especially in communities where women and girls lack decision-making power, cannot express their thoughts, and are seen as the preservers of culture. The education of girls and their sexuality, according to one respondent, 'are controlled, with the aim of perpetuating the traditions and values of the group'. Mothers are held accountable for the continuation of traditions through the education of their girls. The aspect of **honour** is vital here.

'The Serbians, Chechens and Afghans that we met, those are mothers who have been indoctrinated to safeguard traditions. The men tell them, "If your girl is not following tradition, it's your fault," and these threats are backed up by reprisals.'

The **integration of a family or community** was mentioned several times as a factor in determining the risk of these types of marriages. The following aspects increase the risk: being a 'traditional' family (for example, families where grandparents live with the family and respect for the family is very important), families that are isolated from the rest of the population (some respondents called these 'closed' families), families that have recently arrived in Belgium, and families that maintain close ties with their countries of origin.

The **socio-economic status** of a family or community was frequently brought up as a determinant for the risk of forced marriage. Respondents referred to families in their countries of origin (for example, partners coming from deprived families who have high expectations of life in Belgium/Europe), as well as those in Belgium.

4.5.2 Factors associated with individuals

Some respondents pointed out that a **girl's age** increases the risk of forced marriage, for example, when she is approaching the age of marriage or reaching puberty, or when the first signs of femininity are visible.

Another aspect that was frequently mentioned was the **level of dependency** on the family. When youngsters depend strongly on the family, both emotionally and financially, and are raised in a protective environment, it is more difficult to detach from their parents' expectations. At the same time, girls who have a certain level of independence and who express their opinions might also be at risk.

The characteristics of an individual, such as **being gay, being naive, or having low educational levels and/or learning difficulties**, were all considered likely to increase the risk of forced marriage.

One respondent also mentioned that being a **first-generation migrant** might increase the risk, when there is less awareness of the norms and values predominant in Belgium. The **lack of a social network** was also brought up as a risk factor.

Finally, one respondent mentioned that girls **without official documents** are a particularly at-risk group, especially in certain Roma communities:

'Within some Gypsy groups, I know there are parents who smuggle girls of 13 to 14 years into Belgium to marry them off. They earn a lot of money with getting these girls over here. These girls are not registered in Belgium, so nobody knows these girls are here. They do not attend school, and they get pregnant very quickly.'

4.5.3 Factors associated with service provision

Some respondents thought that the **high threshold of services** could deter (potential) victims from seeking help, as they are afraid that this will cause the situation to escalate. It was also mentioned by one respondent that shelters are not part of the normal living environment of Roma communities, and that this increases the risk of forced marriage. Finally, this respondent also referred to the **scarcity of support mechanisms** as a risk factor. More issues relating to service delivery are detailed in Section 4.7.

4.5.4 Factors associated with context

Some respondents mentioned contextual factors that could increase the risk of forced marriage: **the socio-economic status of migrant communities, issues relating to poor performance in education, and higher rates of unemployment** within migrant communities. This, however, does not diminish the importance of tradition and identity.

In addition, the **strict migration laws** in Belgium were also cited as a factor that increases forced marriages:

'Nowadays, the only way for a number of third-country nationals outside the EU to come to Belgium or Europe is through marriage. Either you can request asylum, but that has become very, very strict. It is no longer a possibility to come here as an economic migrant, so marriage is the only way in, and that can put pressure on certain types of marriage. [...] The second factor is integration in the host country. I think that the more integrated communities become by finding work, by having decent housing, and by their children following the whole school trajectory, the more these communities will advance. If these conditions are met, I believe this will diminish the factors of identity and tradition.'

4.6 VISIONS OF THE STAKEHOLDERS ON POLICIES AND LAWS

We also asked our respondents to reflect on the current policy (or absence thereof) that deals with forced marriages in Belgium. Respondents shared their views on the available legal framework (the specific forced-marriage law, the law on marriage migration, the law on partner violence, the law on family reunification, and the law on marriages of convenience) and the National Action Plan (NAP). They also shared some reflections on laws and policies in general.

One of the striking elements was that a number of respondents were **not aware** of the existing law on forced marriage or the NAP, whereas others mentioned that communities might not know that forced marriages are forbidden in Belgium. Some respondents believed that the policies have yielded good results in Belgium, considering that more cases of forced marriage are brought forward. In addition, these respondents believed that the current policies and laws reflect the values and norms of Belgium and demonstrate that the Belgian authorities have taken up the issue of forced marriage.

However, there were also some critical reflections on the policies and laws in Belgium. First of all, the lack of control over the **implementation of policies and laws** was mentioned. Secondly, when comparing Belgium to the Netherlands, one respondent mentioned that there is not much policy in Belgium, and, moreover, that this lack of policy will lead to riots:

‘There is not much policy, I believe. In the Netherlands, there is a protocol on forced marriages and honour violence. They have developed a roadmap in case of a threat: where to refer, who is going to talk with parents, to assess if there is danger, what’s the role of the police, they have special shelters for those women. There’s a whole policy around this. [...] I do not really believe in national action plans. It’s all commitment declarations and intention declarations, [...] but there is no framework in which the issue of diversity is enforceable. [...] If we do not take that step, within ten to 20 years, we might experience situations [like what happened] in the Paris suburbs.’

Another respondent reflected on extreme right-wing policies, i.e. the strict rules regarding migration for marriage, which are leading to an increase in forced and arranged marriages, as well as marriages of convenience:

‘Policy and marriage choice are influencing each other.’

With regard to the **National Action Plan** (NAP), some respondents were positive about it. The NAP provides an opportunity to break the silence on the topic of forced and arranged marriage and to work together, at different levels.

Opinions varied on the **specific law on forced marriage**. Some respondents thought that a specific criminal law on forced marriage is unnecessary, considering that there are other laws that can deal with this, for example, when minors are involved, child marriage can be prosecuted as rape.

It is often thought that such specific criminal laws have a discouraging effect, and that such laws demonstrate that the government deems the problem important. However, not all respondents agreed. Moreover, a respondent raised the question as to whether or not the law on forced marriage can deal with all the other forms of ‘forced’ marriage in the spectrum, with all the different levels of pressure.

Respondents repeatedly brought up that the law is not an easy instrument for victims, seeing that the burden of proof is on the victim (presumption of innocence), i.e. s/he has to prove that there were threats of violence, that there was pressure, that no consent was given, etc. According to a juridical respondent, it is difficult to define and prove a forced marriage. Other crimes related to forced marriage, such as assault and battery, harassment, murder or attempted murder, are easier to prove in this respect. Providing proof of extreme control over an individual, or psychological violence, was considered to be incredibly difficult. Moreover, youngsters are supposed to make a complaint and to launch juridical proceedings against their family/husband, which is very difficult.

'I take the elements that make it an offence. You need to have a marriage, so that marriage must have been concluded. If not, it's only an attempt. Then, a marriage concluded under constraints, but not any constraint, it must be a constraint under physical or psychological violence. And when is a victim going to say she was forced to marry? Who is a victim going to accuse? Her parents? Of having given her an education that led her to accept a marriage, whereas now, after having opened her eyes and seeing things in another context she considers that marriage forced, abusive?'

This led another respondent to conclude that the law on forced marriage only has symbolic value, and that s/he did not have any faith in it, as it can never provide an indication of the magnitude of the problem. Some other respondents, who believe that sanctions alone will not suffice, endorsed this view.

One respondent mentioned that because of the murder of Saida Sheikh, the law on forced marriage was adopted.⁴⁴ In this court case, Sheikh's family was convicted for forced marriage and homicide. The gender dimension was considered an aggravating circumstance. One respondent mentioned that the sentences in this case were very minor, when considering the consequences for the victim (death), or when considering that the consequences of forced marriage last a lifetime in other cases.

Respondents mentioned that the **law on marriage migration** has become stricter (since September 2013). One respondent noted that the new migration law stipulates that a partner can only migrate to Belgium when s/he is 21, so child marriages will become even rarer in Belgium. However, another stated that this is circumvented by falsifying birth certificates or other papers abroad. In addition, the occurrence of marriages with the sole intent of obtaining papers was mentioned by others.

What is even more worrying, as pointed out by a respondent, is that when a partner enters Belgium for marriage, s/he cannot divorce for the first three years, which gives a lot of power to the partner already living in Belgium. This can lead to situations where the partner who migrated ends up staying in an abusive relationship in order to safeguard his/her temporary residence permit. One respondent thought that the law on marriage migration together with the law on partner violence could counter such situations. However, another respondent stated:

44 Saida Sheikh refused a forced marriage and had a relationship with a Belgian man. Her brother killed her with three bullets in October 2007.

'Regarding the residence rights of newcomers, when they are victims of intrafamilial violence, the law states that you have to stay with your husband for a year and one day. Apparently, there is a law that mentions that there is an exception for victims of intrafamilial violence. I have many cases in which the victims are married one and a half, two years, who are in Belgium, but whose residence permits are taken away, even if there are five, six official reports of violence. So, I wonder if the law is active or not. Is it only a law on paper?'

Other effects of this law on marriage migration, as mentioned by respondents, include the increase of the marital age, the decrease in imported brides and better protection of youngsters who grow up in Belgium.

One respondent mentioned that the national laws are very well developed, seeing that there is a new law on marriages of convenience, which increased the aggravating circumstances. However, some communities, such as the Roma, most often marry in a traditional way (customary marriage) before the age of 18. Respondents believed that the law on forced marriage cannot do anything to stop these marriages.

4.7 ISSUES IN SERVICE DELIVERY

The stakeholders' questionnaire included some questions about possible obstacles in service delivery with regard to forced marriages. Stakeholders were also asked to identify any gaps in providing support and care for (potential) victims of forced (and arranged) marriages.

The list of barriers and gaps identified by professionals was, unfortunately, very long and is presented as follows. It has been divided into two sections: one on issues in the work that is currently available to deal with forced marriage, and another section that explores the gaps, i.e. the lack of services and other strategies to adequately tackle the problem of forced marriage in Belgium.

4.7.1 Obstacles in working on the problem of forced marriage in Belgium

A particular area of concern was the **issue of forced marriage in the Roma communities of Belgium**, and the problems encountered by those professionals who deal with this. These communities are affected by child marriages and forced and arranged marriages, as already outlined in previous sections of this report.

One of the most striking findings of this research is that services do not really act to deal with this problem. According to one respondent who works with Roma communities, most services acknowledge and know about the problem of child marriages among Roma communities, but do not act upon it (any more). Secondly, the poor economic situation and very high unemployment rates of the Roma communities in their home countries were cited as problematic. Thirdly, the attitudes towards marriage-related issues and services, as well as the insufficient knowledge among these communities about services, were identified as obstacles in adequate service delivery on forced marriage among the Roma in Belgium.

Respondents mentioned that Roma communities are very suspicious towards services, and do not know where to go in case of a forced marriage. Moreover, working with Roma communities is based on a relationship of trust, which can be severely jeopardised if it becomes known that a professional helped someone to escape a forced or arranged marriage. Arranged marriages are considered the norm, and the subject of marriage is sensitive and difficult to discuss with Roma communities. It is the same for discussing the fact that a girl's prospects and future chances are jeopardised if she drops out of school. Respondents stressed the fact that it will take time to change these attitudes and behaviours.

Another concern was that discussions about the human body and sexuality were problematic for Roma communities, hence the reason why their children are not allowed to attend these classes in school.

Finally, knowledge of Belgian services is lacking among the Roma. For example, for teenage mothers who still need to attend school, day care for their children is not an option. This system (of day care) is considered very strange, as Roma children are raised within the family. Moreover, Roma communities do not know that finding a place in a day-care centre needs to be done early in the pregnancy. Language is also seen as a barrier for Roma communities, especially when minor brides come from abroad.

Many respondents considered **mediation** complex and problematic. It is often done with the best of intentions, for example, by teachers, who discuss a forced marriage with parents. However, mediation is not often recognised as the cause of serious problems for the victim. It requires a case-by-case analysis, whereby the whole family system and the security plan must be carefully assessed. One respondent mentioned that mediation in cases of forced or arranged marriage cannot be based on the same strategy as dealing with problems in school. Mediation is difficult for parents, who are strongly attached to traditions and social obligations in their communities, as one's position therein is very valuable and necessary for survival. Mediation can be very threatening to these people.

One respondent mentioned that parallel mediation is sometimes done, for example, by services, as well as by family members, in order to solve the problem. When the victim chooses to return to his/her family in the end, service providers can find it frustrating. Identifying the right person for mediation is also difficult. Using interpreters, imams or family members was recognised as problematic. These members of the community can work as deterrents to victims to stepping forward. Moreover, they have loyalties towards families and/or communities. At the same time, it was acknowledged that family members might be the only people to whom families are willing to listen and talk.

Many respondents shared their **concerns with regard to the service delivery** that is currently available. These concerns deal mainly with the **attitudes and feelings of professionals, the attitudes and feelings of the communities, and the strategies and activities of the services** themselves.

The feelings and attitudes of communities that obstruct adequate service delivery refer mainly to fears about shelters and their services, as well as the differences in values and norms concerning issues of forced and arranged marriage. Respondents stated that the fear of exposing family problems and putting blame on the family is a barrier to seeking help from services, indicating that they are underused. It should also not be underestimated that taking the step to seek help in a shelter is extremely difficult for victims, especially minors, who have never lived outside a family setting or community.

The threshold to go to services, including the police, was considered high. One respondent believed that for the second and third generations of Turkish and Moroccan communities this might be easier because they know the services better than other communities, such as Pakistanis. Finally, one respondent mentioned that the perception among communities of existing services is not always accurate, due to prejudices or inadequate knowledge.

With regard to the feelings, attitudes and skills of professionals, the respondents expressed a number of concerns. Fears of stigmatising communities, stereotypes about other ethnic communities, cultural relativism, communication problems due to language barriers and/or differences in value systems were all believed to hinder adequate service delivery.

One respondent mentioned that s/he encountered difficulties in sensitising magistrates. Another respondent stated that forced marriages are not questioned by youth magistrates or other professionals due to a lack of arguments to counter them, and the fact that no legal argument is available, seeing as one can marry from the age of 16 onwards.

Deficiencies in the skills of professionals were also noted. One respondent referred to difficulties in assessing the level of danger for a person, diagnosing the situation and taking appropriate action. Moreover, according to a respondent, the curricula of professionals lack instruction in how to deal with diversity in our current society. In this respect, another respondent mentioned that curricula, for example, those of teachers or social workers, do not provide up-to-date and realistic theories, such as the intersectionality approach, and that traditional theories are still very common (for example, the cultural perspective). As a result, the professionals do not have the tools to act appropriately in all situations.

Issues relating to the activities and strategies of services are as follows: long waiting lists, slow response rates, issues with shelters, divorce as a solution to coping with forced marriage, not reaching men and boys, a lack of services for isolated population groups, and the inability to reach target groups for sensitisation efforts.

Several respondents mentioned that some sensitisation activities, such as brochures or campaigns, were not well adapted to the target populations, and that such types of activities should not stigmatise populations. Some respondents criticised the current approach of services as being one-sided.

Shelters are an important aspect of service delivery for victims, yet one respondent mentioned that the provision thereof was 'a disaster', and it is even worse for undocumented migrants.

There are not enough shelters, and they are not able to deal adequately with the feelings of isolation and loneliness experienced by victims of forced marriage. Counselling is a problem when language is a barrier. Furthermore, considering that shelters are a short-term solution, no long-term follow-up is put in place, and the reintegration of victims remains problematic. The lack of shelters, and especially the lack of specific care for victims of forced marriage, results in placing victims 'where there is a place available, which can lead to very distressing situations', according to one respondent.

A specific concern mentioned by many respondents is related to population groups that are isolated, and are thus difficult to reach. These groups include undocumented migrants (as aforementioned) and newcomers.

Newcomers arriving in Belgium through family reunification sometimes find themselves all alone, without social contacts, not speaking the language, and abused by their partners. The right of residence stipulates that they have to remain with their spouse for three years in order to keep their residence permit. This is considered problematic when the relationship is abusive.

Isolated victims are totally dependent on their partners and therefore do not find their way to services easily. Gaining access to these individuals, as well as to communities that are 'closed', and providing them with sufficient solutions is very delicate and difficult, according to one respondent. For instance, the fact that divorce is sometimes proposed as a way out of a forced or abusive marriage that was arranged, meets some problems.

Finally, when it comes to the **development and implementation of policies and laws** regarding forced marriage, many concerns were brought up. Respondents found it problematic that a lot of definitions of forced marriage are circulating. Moreover, distinguishing between forced and arranged marriage was difficult when implementing policies and law into practice. This leads to mixing up types of marriages, or difficulties in proving that an arranged marriage has evolved into a forced marriage.

Another respondent noted that the non-recognition of the complexity of the issue posed a barrier to service delivery. Yet another described the following:

‘Everything is put into one container – fake marriages, forced marriages, arranged marriages, grey and white marriages – as it is all focused on stopping migration. There is a very right-wing discourse that is used around migration and marriage.’

Another respondent acknowledged that when there is no embedded policy supported by a vision on diversity, it will characterise the provision of care, be it preventative or curative, directly impacting the support that is provided to the victim:

‘There is no steering or monitoring body, not only for forced marriage, but for everything that is linked with diversity and intercultural issues. It all depends on the personal commitment of a counsellor or care provider. Most professionals approach diversity issues as they do with the average Flemish family, resulting in a trajectory filled with disasters. There is also no control mechanism, no charter, no commitment declaration, and no minister to make diversity an issue.’

Another respondent mentioned the extreme right-wing migration policy as an influencing factor, believing that stricter rules regarding marriage migration pave the way for forced and arranged marriages, and could lead to an increase in these marriages.

Involving communities in policy development is complex, as communities in which forced marriages take place often consider such policies stigmatising.

Policy implementation was also obstructed by the inadequate exchange of experiences and communication between stakeholders. One respondent stated that the fact that forced marriage is linked to honour-related violence causes problems among professionals who only deal with forced marriage, or only with honour-related violence, and they are not aware of each other’s work. Moreover, migration is dealt with at the regional level of government, and the fact that municipalities decide freely on how strict they can be on marriage migration, causing people to ‘shop’ between cities in order to marry, is not helpful either.

The lack of a circular from public prosecutors on forced marriage results in police zones assuming that it is not a problem in their area.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ A circular, or COL, details the practical implementation of a law for all professionals in a particular sector.

Respondents mentioned a range of issues and challenges with respect to the available laws and legal framework:

- **Reporting:** One respondent mentioned the discrepancy in numbers between the registered cases by a specialised police unit in Brussels and what people working in the field are noticing and experiencing. The fact that a study on forced marriage in Brussels did not expose the issue to be a problem was considered detrimental. Another respondent stated that many cases are filed under intrafamilial violence or marriages of convenience because ‘it’s the easiest thing to do’. Finally, it was noted that it is highly problematic for a victim to make a complaint if there is no appropriate care for him/her afterwards.
- **Providing evidence:** Difficulties in finding proof and evidence are the reason why forced marriage is rarely treated by jurisdictions, for example, difficulties in providing proof of a lack of consent or the presence of threats, or that a marriage was concluded for residence papers only. Finding witnesses who are willing to testify against the community or family is also challenging. Very often, as respondents mentioned, this results in building cases based on other offences, such as abuse or harassment, whereby forced marriage is only a side issue.
- **Abuses of the legal framework** were also mentioned, as is the case with marriages of convenience and the falsification of documents (for example, birth certificates). What’s more, professional secrecy provisions hinder the exchange of vital information between professionals in cases of forced marriage. Sometimes, different services are involved in working with one family, but they do not know this or cannot exchange information due to professional secrecy.

4.7.2 Gaps influencing service delivery for (potential) victims of forced marriage

Respondents acknowledged several gaps that negatively impact the adequate provision of services for those affected by forced marriage. These are examined in detail in this section.

Knowledge among professionals was considered insufficient, regarding forced marriage in particular and intercultural competencies in general. This lack of knowledge affects a wide variety of professionals, including police officers, community-based organisations, youth welfare services, teachers, social workers, prosecutors and magistrates. This leads to feelings of doubt among professionals, to the non-registration of cases of forced marriage, and ultimately results in ‘amateurish work’, in ‘no one really knowing what to do’, and in ‘dealing with everybody on the same basis, which is not helpful in an intercultural setting’. To summarise, it leads to inadequate action or total inaction.

One respondent mentioned that organisations for youth welfare are afraid to deal with youngsters and parents regarding this issue:

‘They do not want to create any problems and prefer to remain satisfied with the current way of working. Federations of community-based organisations do not take up the issue either, although they could act as the link between service providers and communities.’

The **lack of information and tools for professionals** might be one of the main reasons for this lack of knowledge and, consequently, for deficiencies in service delivery. Information was, according to respondents, notably lacking with regard to: recognising and acknowledging forced marriage, intervention protocols (mediation, how to address the issue, or where to refer in cases of life-threatening situations), the legal framework and the rights of victims.

Professionals also lack the skills needed to deal with intercultural issues and diversity. This was, according to one respondent, due to a lack of education and training:

'The subject of "interculturality" is optional, something a student can choose to follow in his or her curriculum – if there are not enough students, it is often cancelled – which results in most professionals not being adequately equipped to deal with such issues. For example, psychologists – they are totally idle in the area of diversity. They are strongly focused on the individual, and then these people become coordinators and cannot be convinced to deal with diversity. It is very frustrating.'

The lack of monitoring and evaluation of actions provided within services was mentioned as an issue for appropriate service delivery, as well as the non-registration of cases of forced marriage.

The fact that intervention protocols are non-existent results in professionals fending for themselves. This was considered an element that diminishes the quality of services.

Respondents noted several gaps in services. Some noted the **lack of shelters in general** and the **lack of specialised and secure shelters with proper accommodation for minors**. Mainstream shelters, with women who are victims of intimate partner violence or intrafamilial violence, are not always the best place for young girls. The lack of shelters is problematic. If, for example, a victim refuses to be put in a specific shelter because it is too close to home, she ends up at the bottom of the waiting list. The lack of initiatives for long-term follow-up and reintegration of victims are also items that need to be addressed, according to respondents.

The **lack of any action to deal with child marriages among the Roma** was also quite worrying.

Another gap in service delivery is the **lack of specific psychotherapy for victims** of forced marriage. For the most part, they are dealt with using the therapy for intrafamilial violence.

Service delivery for those who are 'invisible' is also missing. As one respondent mentioned, the most serious cases do not come to the attention of service providers, for example, those who are locked up and/or used as house slaves, or those in seriously violent situations. Service providers focus too much on Belgian victims, as they are embedded in the system (school, social networks, etc.).

Some respondents mentioned that the **lack of research** needs to be addressed. For example, measuring the effectiveness of interventions is required, as is an estimation of the prevalence of forced marriage. The lack of numbers might be due to the non-registration of forced marriage, to the complexity of the issue, and to the fact that there is a 'dark' number that is very difficult to estimate.

The **lack of coordination at several levels** was also pointed out, specifically between Flanders and Wallonia, which have different viewpoints on forced marriage and dissimilar ways of working. However, one respondent stated that both regions could learn from each other, as their ways of working are complementary. More coordination is also needed in the provision of shelters. Services and professionals also do not coordinate their work, for example, feedback is not provided when different professionals work on one case, and there is a lack of coordination between the various services involved, for example, to follow up with victims or families.

One gap in service delivery that was frequently mentioned was the **lack of sufficient resources** to provide adequate services. This was referred to with regard to the long-term follow-up of victims, as well as in the short term (for example, the need for sufficient personnel for mediation, as this takes time). The fact that respondents indicated that shelters are full or have long waiting lists indicates that there is indeed a lack of resources to provide care for victims. One respondent mentioned that the financial crisis was hindering the work of the police and the municipalities with regard to forced marriage.

Finally, **deficiencies in knowledge among communities** were mentioned. The lack of knowledge about laws on migration, marriage and forced marriage among people who enter Belgium was brought up. This refers to, amongst other things, the fact that the migrating partner can lose his/her residence permit when divorcing within three years. Communities also lack a knowledge of services, for example, how to report violence or where to go for health care, or lack of knowledge of shelters, etc. Youngsters are often ignorant of alternative options when facing a forced marriage. This should also be adequately confronted.

4.8 THE LINK WITH HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Not many respondents established a link between forced marriages and human trafficking. Most often, human trafficking was linked to arranged marriages or marriages of convenience, which involve money (amounts from € 10,000 to € 15,000 were alluded to by a respondent). Trafficking was also considered when marriages are concluded to obtain residence permits or for reasons of prostitution. One respondent mentioned that human trafficking for reasons of prostitution was sometimes linked to marriage, when marriage was necessary to be able to migrate and to obtain a residence permit in Belgium. The phenomena of lover-boys who force girls into prostitution was also mentioned in this respect.

One respondent clearly established a link between trafficking and marriages:

'I believe the strict migration policy here makes people more creative when crossing the borders, and abuse becomes less visible because it is punishable.'

Some respondents stated that the link is apparent when victims are isolated and exploited, for example, when they have to take care of the family, whereas the partner deals with all other things, such as finances, and the victim has no possibility of integration.

One respondent mentioned a case in which she established a clear link between human trafficking and marriage:

'There was the case of a young Albanian girl. A centre for minors referred this girl to me. She had made a complaint to the police for violence. The police protected her and had put her in this centre. A short while after that, the centre contacted me because the girl was going to turn 18. The fear was that she was going to end up in a network of prostitution, as she was going to be sent to Germany. There had been an exchange of money between her father and a man in Germany, apparently to marry her to that man, but there were severe suspicions by the police. They thought she was in real danger. The girl then disappeared. We never received any more news.'

Finally, one respondent was quite outspoken, stating that girls who are forced to marry are victims of human trafficking:

'The link is that the girl is an element of trade. Certainly, in some cases, there is a bride price. There is a form of merchandising at the beginning. The girl is an object. She is considered an object, not a person. [...] They are people of whom no one asks their opinion, who are instruments in the hands of the parents, and who are projects of the parents. [...] If there is no bride price, then still there is the whole question of tradition and honour that has to pass through the girl, the woman. So here you are: she's an object through whom a whole series of values and traditions pass, and she is the instrument of that. She is not considered a person, so, for me, this is human trafficking.'

5

recommendations

The respondents provided a wide range of recommendations to improve prevention, protection, prosecution, provision of services, coordination, etc.

One recommendation that was repeatedly mentioned was the need to **integrate diversity into services**, the minds of service providers, and the public in general. Respondents working with affected communities were especially vocal in their calls for building competencies to deal with diversity, including diverse values and norms, image-building other cultures, intercultural communication skills, context and the background of migration, etc.

One respondent mentioned a need for intercultural competencies in every educational curriculum, and diversity should be included as a transversal theme. All professionals, as well as community-based organisations and federations, need to leave their comfort zones, face intercultural issues and acknowledge the problems arising therefrom. Every service (youth courts, integral youth support, all sectors and services) should be coached and trained in how to deal with diversity.

Another suggestion made by this respondent was the development of a manual or quality criterion to subsidise a service, based on diversity: services need to prove that they take into account diversity issues and how they deal with them, as there is a need for a 'compelling framework' and 'a minister who is committed to pushing for integrating diversity into every service'. There is a need for a framework to which an authority can be held accountable, which stipulates that non-recognition of diversity is not an option.

'Immigration is a structural reality in Belgium, and we need to integrate that, and it has to be part of our work. We need to acknowledge this and recognise specific needs without ethnicising the question too much.'

With regard to **policymaking**, respondents mentioned a need for clear directives for magistrates. In this respect, a circular, or COL, on forced marriage was recommended, either a specific one or one complementary to the COL3 (on intrafamilial violence), which explains forced marriage, the mechanisms behind it, the different behaviours of the perpetrators and the victims, the warning signs, punishments, etc. In this way, forced marriage will become visible. It can be centralised, statistics will be available, and the whole territory of Belgium will be included. At a national level, one respondent suggested that the country needs guidelines or protocols at policy level itself, similar to the policy in the Netherlands.

With respect to the law on forced marriage, one respondent mentioned that a law alone cannot stop this practice. Another respondent backed this up and stressed that legal actions should go hand in hand with respectful interventions towards families and communities. One respondent mentioned that the law on forced marriage could be improved by a provision that the burden of proof should be on the perpetrator, i.e. that s/he did *not* exert any pressure or use violence on the victim. In the case of child marriage, one respondent mentioned that these marriages should always be prosecuted, even when concluded abroad, and that the children involved should be withdrawn from their parental authority.

A lot of recommendations were provided with regard to **improving the reception of (potential) victims**. Respondents acknowledged that providing adequate support and future prospects to victims is important. The problem of sheltering victims was acknowledged (as aforementioned in this section), and respondents said that specialised shelters could be created or existing structures adapted, as long as the victims received proper accommodation and support. For example, extra beds could be made available for young victims.

Social workers already have vast experience that can be expanded to include forced marriage. Respondents suggested that we need to look abroad to learn how it is tackled there, and to assess whether it is possible to incorporate these policies into the Belgian context (for example, in France, it might be easier to create safe havens as it is a huge country, whereas in Belgium, it might be difficult).

One respondent mentioned that those who leave their family to escape forced marriage need to learn how to deal with autonomy and freedom. In this respect, she referred to France, where victims live in families (other than their own), where they can learn how to deal with freedom, autonomy, and where they are well supported and certain boundaries are set without them being left alone, as is the case when they are in a shelter. As one respondent summarised it:

‘To reintegrate victims, we need to develop structures, such as specialised centres or reception families, or reference persons, or supervised apartments, but we should also leave space to develop initiatives that are adapted to the local context.’

With regard to **sensitisation, capacity-building and training**, the need to inform and train prosecutors, magistrates and other professionals who are likely to encounter forced marriage, was mentioned several times. Forced marriage should be included in the curricula of professionals, while another respondent stressed that diversity needs to be included in all educational curricula as well. Guidance should be provided to teachers and care providers to assess the risk, to assess whether there is space to negotiate, to determine which individuals can help in mediating.

Sensitisation among communities was also recognised as important. It can be done through schools and specialised organisations, and should focus on norms and values, as one respondent mentioned. Another stipulated that informational materials on forced marriage could also be displayed in the consultation rooms of doctors and in various organisations.

When it comes to **working with communities and victims**, one respondent mentioned that victims need to be identified and protected, and we need to reflect on how this can be done in the best possible way, with what budget, and in which cases action is required. In this respect, the suggestion of working from an intersectional approach is worth taking into consideration:

‘It’s important to frame certain phenomena in a particular context, in a proper way, and to analyse them in that way. Intersectionality is a very good framework for doing this. It looks at gender norms, ethnicity, age, etc., as different axes that are combined to analyse phenomena. The position of an individual will be different, depending on what axes you take.’

Frequently, respondents mentioned that dealing with forced marriage is not an exact science, and that it can only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Each case needs to be analysed individually, every time. There is no routine treatment in cases of forced marriage. Each situation requires a detailed analysis. A respondent mentioned that even when working on changing attitudes about the school attendance of minor Roma girls, it was important to consider each case individually and not to generalise, as not all Roma force their children to marry.

When working with victims, one respondent stressed the need to build capacity towards autonomy, to take responsibility and not rely on others. (Potential) victims should be given all possible options. The importance of an engagement period prior to marriage was also suggested in the work towards communities. Another respondent thought it important to empower individuals to act in their own interests, instead of the interests of a group, as is often the case in Turkish and Moroccan communities.

The Quran was also suggested as a means of finding arguments to counter forced marriage, and Islam could be referred to, according to one respondent, as a channel to help parents who are trying to find a way out of forced marriage.

Parents should be empowered, for example, mothers in standing up for their daughters and fathers in sharing responsibility for the education of their children. Parents should also be empowered to explain to their children all the aspects involved when choosing a partner from their country of origin.

A respondent suggested that small-scale initiatives with low thresholds could be set up, such as discussion groups with parents and/or members of the communities on how to deal with the expectations and pressure from the environment regarding marriage, where personal feelings regarding marriage can be shared, where inter-ethnic marriages can be de-problematised, etc. Another respondent suggested that parents should be aware and accept that children cannot be controlled entirely, as their personality is also shaped by school, friends, the environment, etc.

In working with victims, the need to find long-term solutions was expressed by many respondents. For example, in Roma communities, traditions can be adjusted, but it will take time, as one respondent said. Another respondent stated that changing behaviour takes several generations, hence the need for long-term strategies. Also, when it comes to supporting, monitoring and following up victims, this requires a long-term approach, and it should be acknowledged that this is costly. The **need to increase resources** was therefore frequently mentioned, in order to stop forced marriage and provide appropriate care for victims.

Tailor-made **mediation** as a strategy to work with victims was suggested, not only at crisis moments, but on a regular basis. It was also suggested that intercultural mediators should be included from the very beginning, when assessing the problem. If these mediators could help service providers in making referrals, help would be much more efficient. Criteria for mediators were also suggested, and included the following: a respectful attitude towards communities, respect from communities, being known in the communities, having wide networks in the communities, etc.

Finally, with regard to the work with communities, one respondent stressed the fact that prevention, not migration policy, should be prioritised:

'I think we should work here and not necessarily close our borders. [...] Belgium increased the conditions for family reunification. The criteria are more and more demanding. I think that is a problem, a concrete problem related to finding solutions regarding marriage issues. I think we need to work on prevention, to try to develop good actions for victims or potential victims. We need to work with parents, with families because mostly, they are in difficulty, and they only find this solution [forced marriage] to deal with their problems. [...] We need to invest in prevention. It is really our priority. We need to take care of victims, but we also need to build the capacities of youngsters to negotiate with parents [...] avoid stigmatisation.'

The **need for better coordination** was also expressed. This could be done by either developing new initiatives or by building on existing structures, as one respondent stated. Examples of a reference person and a special coordination mechanism were mentioned. Such a reference person could follow up a case all the way through and be the liaison between all the people involved. One respondent stated that there is a need for better coordination between Flanders and Wallonia, and that campaigns should be the same in both parts of the country. One suggestion to enhance coordination was to design one package, one framework:

'In the end, the ethnic minorities in Belgium are not new. There have been various suggestions done in Paula D'Hondt's report, a report that is old now, but we still do not have – at Flemish level, at least – a framework, for example, in education and youth support services and so on, a framework with accredited translators and interpreters, intercultural mediators, experts who are available to email or to call to discuss cases, for supervision moments, and so on, and that all those things are in one package, in one training [course]. Is that so difficult to organise? I do not think so. Does it cost that much money? I do not think so. [...] I think this is really the challenge for the future, for the service provision, and I do not know when politicians will wake up or [if they] can be woken up.'

Some respondents mentioned that more should be done to detect and report cases of forced marriage. Suggestions were made to create **low-threshold initiatives to report cases**.

The **non-judgmental attitude** of professionals and volunteers when dealing with cases of forced marriage was frequently mentioned. In order to tackle this, one respondent suggested working on prejudices regarding marriage migration by explaining the deeper meanings of this complex issue, so that prejudices do not hinder adequate and early care.

More research is needed, according to two respondents, in order to evaluate mechanisms that are put in place, for example, the special police units, and to provide figures. These figures will provide a better understanding of the risk factors and will provide evidence to negotiate with policymakers and funders. However, research is also necessary to acquire an overall view of forced marriage, and to obtain knowledge on the effects of actions on its evolution.

Socio-economic factors are key in emancipation and integration, according to one respondent. Therefore, as some respondents stressed, **enhancing education and labour-market prospects** for migrants is important, in order to avoid drastic measures (for example, victims who need to flee to shelters, or removing children from their parental authority). In the case of Roma communities, it was suggested that alternatives should be considered for minor mothers to attend school. At the same time, as some respondents stressed, the issue of early school-leaving among the Roma should be addressed strictly and laws should be applied.

Various experts mentioned the importance of **sharing knowledge and expertise**, not only in Belgium, but also with neighbouring countries.

Finally, one respondent stated that the issue of forced marriage should be dealt with from a **human-rights perspective**, as every individual has the right to choose his or her partner freely.

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