

Is Forced Marriage a Problem in the United States?

Intergenerational Conflict over Marital Choice Among College Students at the City University of New York from Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian Migrant Families¹

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Abstract:

During the past decade, European parliaments, researchers, and social service providers have recognized and designed policy to address forced marriages, in which migrant parents, primarily from Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian (MENASA) families, impose marital choices on their European-raised children, through coercion, emotional abuse, psychological pressure, kidnapping, trickery, physical violence or the threat of violence. In the United States there has been little research on forced marriage, despite over three million resident migrants from these countries. Drawing on interviews from a purposive sample of 100 City University of New York students, this study documents the presence of intergenerational conflict over honor, sexuality, and marital choice within MENASA migrant communities with the goal of assessing whether forced marriage is a problem in the United States. Results suggest that there is significant and widespread intra-familial conflict over marital choice within this population and that forced marriage may be a problem for some young people in US migrant communities. However, definitions and policy approaches derived from Europe may not be suitable to the vastly different receiving country conditions encountered in the United States.

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Introduction:

During the past decade, European parliaments, researchers, and social service providers have recognized forced marriages, in which migrant parents impose marital choices on their European-raised children, through coercion, emotional abuse, psychological pressure, kidnapping, trickery, physical violence or the threat of violence as an important political and social issue (Anitha and Gill 2009). Generally regarded as a problem affecting migrants from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA), Denmark, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands have passed migration statutes and developed social service and law enforcement structures that are meant to address this problem. Additionally, many sending countries have begun discussions with European governments about their role in non-consensual marriage (Chantler et al 2009).

In the United States, which is home to more foreign-born individuals than any country in the world and contains over three million migrants from the MENASA countries (US Census 2010), there has been no research or discussion of the matter, beyond the limited efforts of several small non-profit foundations. In 2012, the House of

Representatives mentioned the need to study and address the related problem of honor violence. However, there is no indication any action has been taken and there remains no official data on the nature or scope of crimes related to honor or issues of marital choice in the United States. In the following paper we recount an attempt to use social science research techniques to address the following questions:

- What is the likelihood that forced marriage exists in the US;
- How serious and widespread are conflicts connected to marital choice for young adults from MENASA migrant backgrounds in the United States

We draw on interviews with a purposive sample of 100 young Americans of MENASA descent, regarding family conflicts over honor, sexuality, marital choice, divorce, and cultural values. These respondents were recruited through random intercept at various campuses across the City University of New York in 2012. The sample was chosen for accessibility, age range, and the expectation that forced marriage prevalence is likely to be lower among individuals of MENASA backgrounds enrolled in tertiary education than similarly aged individuals who are not enrolled. This, it was hypothesized, is due to the role that a college education has historically played in integrating migrants and giving them a greater range of life choices. Respondents reported significant and widespread intra-familial conflict over marital choice in their immediate families and for individuals in their social networks. This suggests that forced marriage may be a problem for some young people in US migrant communities.

Forced Marriage: Extant Studies of the Problem

According to most research, arranged marriages currently occur throughout the world in ways that vary from highly coercive to entirely consensual (Home Office 2000). Major newspapers in many MENASA countries show numerous examples of classified advertisements by parents acting as marriage brokers for adult sons and daughters, many of whom are successful professionals. However, in parts of the world where peasant agrarian corporate families are predominant, dating does not exist, and the ideal of a companionate “love” union remains uncommon children typically do not expect to have the final decision in their marriage.

When families from such “traditional” backgrounds migrate to nearby cities or to nations in the West a clash of values may emerge. Children raised in the receiving society may expect to completely exclude parents from the choice of a spouse or request that parents broker the arrangement, rather than make the final decision. Parents, who are often isolated in nuclear families in receiving countries may sometimes seek a more traditional path that leads to explosive tensions. In situations where there is direct conflict between the desires of the parents and those of the children, “forced marriage” sometimes occurs (Home Office 2000).

Nearly all studies of forced marriage to date have been in Europe, where there is a widely accepted concern and various countries have enacted laws to address the problem (Hvilshoj 2006; Stollavistskaia and McElroy 2006; Berghahn and Rostock 2006). In Germany and the Netherlands, substantial research has been conducted on family honor and violence in migrant communities and forced marriage has been a part of this research (Janssen 2012). The United Kingdom has probably had the most robust response to the

problem from both a policy and scholarship perspective. The Forced Marriage Unit, which was founded in 2006 by an act of Parliament reports that “advice or support” was given in 1485 cases, covering 60 countries between 2007 and 2013. It has published various reports on forced marriage in the UK, surveyed police records and attempted to identify numbers and trends (Foreign and Commonwealth Office et al 2006, 2013).

Scholarly literature in the UK has primarily focused on the roles of multiculturalism and migration law in facilitating forced marriage (Chantler et al 2009; Hester et al. 2008) and the politics of race and ethnocentrism inscribed in concerns over forced marriage (Razak 2004; Gill and Anitha 2011; Volpp, 2000; Philips and Dustin 2004; Oprea 2005; Batsleer et al 2002). Scholars seeking to avoid this ethnocentrism have referenced divisions over values around marriage within migrant communities (Caroll 1998; Gangoli et al 2006) and state level migration policies connected to residence rules for spouses (Hossain and Turner 2002; Philips and Dustin 2004; Wilson 2007).

In the United States, as stated in the introduction, there has been little research or publication on forced marriage. Critical theorists have addressed macro-political issues related to post-911 invidious representations of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2011; Siddiqi 2005, Toor 2012), but there has been little empirical work on MENASA migrant marriage patterns. However, a small policy oriented literature has emerged recently. Alanen (2011) compiled a record of the laws and statutes related to forced marriage across the United States and identified types of non-consensual marriage among native born citizens who are not from migrant communities. The Tahirih Justice Center (2011) surveyed social service providers in an attempt to gauge the nature and incidence of

forced marriage cases among migrants. Roy (2011) drew on broad cultural knowledge to discuss the general contours of forced marriage as experienced by South Asian Americans, and Sauti Yetu (2012) documented cases of forced marriage that were uncovered among African migrants to the United States.

Most recently, Sri and Raja (2013) produced a broad-ranging report entitled “Voices from the Frontline: Addressing Forced Marriage within the United States”. At the center of this report is a survey of 524 South Asian students, domestic violence professionals, and refugee service providers who had participated in voluntary and mandatory (as part of job training) seminars and professional talks on forced marriage. Data from their post-training interviews is used to assert that “the practice of forced marriage does impact a wide variety of communities in the United States” (38).

In this article, we provide data that complements the work of Sri and Raja (2013), by showing how some MENASA youth understand and articulate conflicts over marital choice, in the absence of the specialized training that may have biased their data.

Methods

Reduced marital choice takes many forms, from subtle emotional pressures not to disappoint parents or other family members to parents taking their children on a family vacation to the sending country and forcing them to marry while there. Our study sought to gain an understanding of how respondents experience this continuum. For this reason we avoided asking directly about “forced marriage” and other highly stigmatized behaviors. Interview questions were designed to be neutral and open ended, in order to capture the nuances of respondents’ lives and values around marital choice, rather than

attempting to compel simplistic judgments about whether marriages in their social networks were forced.

Data collection began in June 2012 and continued intermittently until May 2013, during which time 100 university students with at least one parent from the MENASA region were interviewed at the City University of New York (59 female, 41 male). Students from MENASA migrant families were targeted in order to develop an appropriate comparison group with contemporary European research which has identified forced marriage as most prevalent among 17-25 year olds in MENASA migrant communities where arranged marriage is common (see Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2013).

University students were chosen due to their accessibility, diversity of background and locale of residence, and the hypothesis that “forced marriage” would be least prevalent among young adults with significant social and cultural capital in the receiving society. Findings of reduced choice and increased family pressure around marital choice within this relatively privileged, geographically mobile, and socially outward looking group would be more significant than a random sample in a specific community.

Recruitment was accomplished through intercept at varied daytime and nighttime hours in the corridors, hallways, lunchrooms, and study lounges of City College, John Jay College and Borough of Manhattan Community College of the City University of New York. Students who had an appearance that suggested MENASA ancestry were approached by female interviewers from varied religious, ethnic, and national traditions

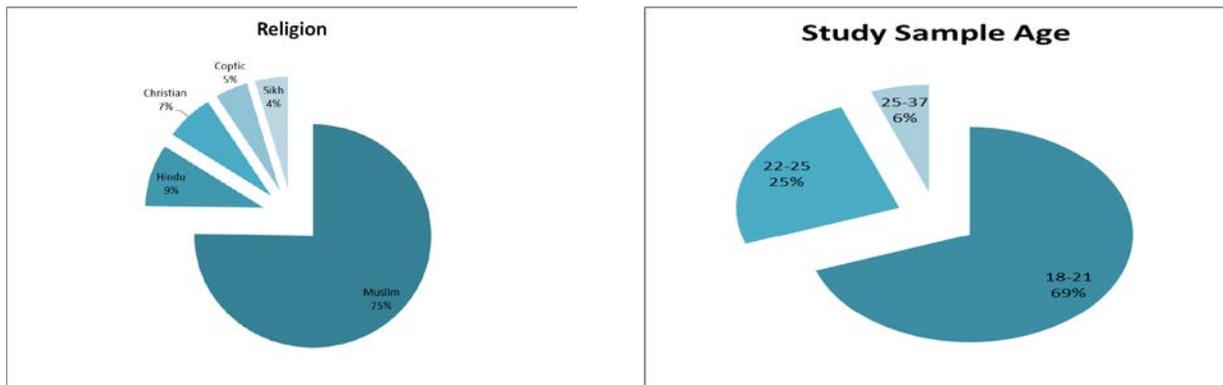
within MENASA migrant communities. While this form of recruitment, based on what might be described as ethnic profiling, can yield significant sampling biases, the use of peer recruiters and interviewers from the communities we sought to research enabled us to recruit respondents from a broad range of social classes, national backgrounds, and with varying levels of acculturation. We do not claim a perfectly representative sample, but believe it is sufficiently diverse to begin a substantive discussion of marital choice and MENASA migrants.

Recruiters asked prospective respondents about their ancestry. If they met the inclusion criterion they were asked to participate in a 30 minute interview about marriage and family in exchange for \$20. Less than half of those approached agreed to participate. The most common reason for declining to be interviewed was that they did not have the time because a class was approaching. Although we did not have the means to determine whether this answer hid deeper concerns, interviewers generally received friendly responses and detected no obvious signs of hostility to the research.

As is often the case when interviews are done with strangers on sensitive topics, we found, in field trials, that questions about third parties in the respondents' social networks elicited more robust responses than those about the person being interviewed. However, some respondents used the open ended questions about their social networks as an opportunity to discuss their own situations. We have used many of these first person narratives in the qualitative section due to their relative richness, in comparison with the third person narratives that provide the bulk of the data.

Demographics of the Sample

Students with family from a wide variety of countries were represented in the sample. The most prevalent countries in the sample were Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, mirroring prevalence findings of the UK Forced Marriage Unit (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2013). Forty-five percent of the respondents were born in the

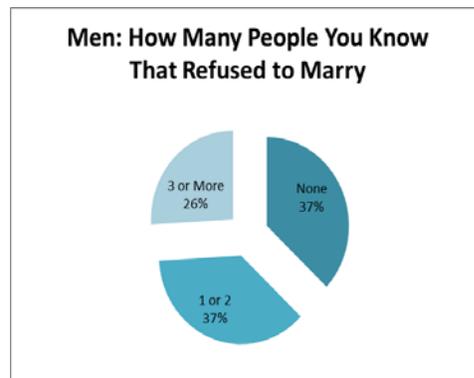
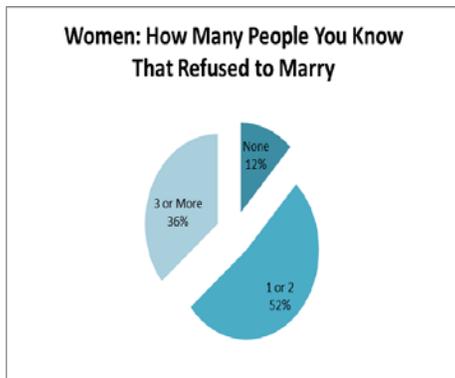
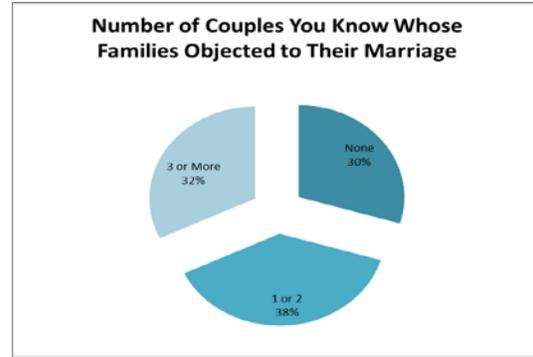


United States and individuals who identified as Muslim were the most prevalent in the sample (75%), followed by Hindu, Pentecostal Christian, Coptic Christian, and Sikh. The majority were students of traditional college ages, with 69% of the sample between 18-21, and another 25% between 22-25 years of age.

The earliest reported migration of family members to NYC was 1960, the latest was 2009. However, the overwhelming majority had attended high school in New York City and spent a significant percentage of their culturally formative years in the United States. More than 80% of the sample described themselves as “not very” or “somewhat” religious and only 6% were married, though 15% described themselves as engaged.

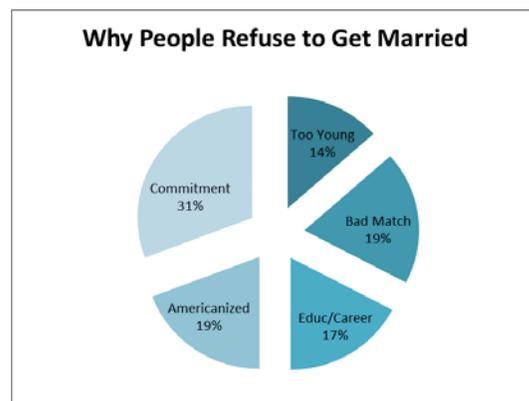
Findings

Our findings indicate that, among respondents, familial conflict over marital choice is extremely common. Over 70% reported knowing couples whose families had objected to their marriage and a third of the sample knew more than three.



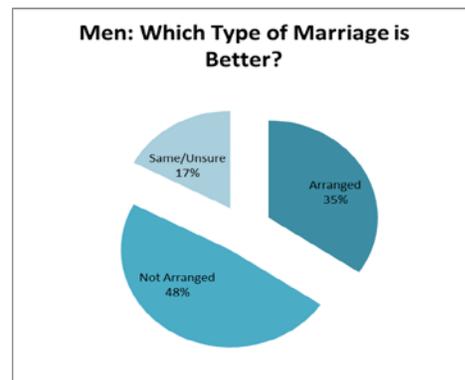
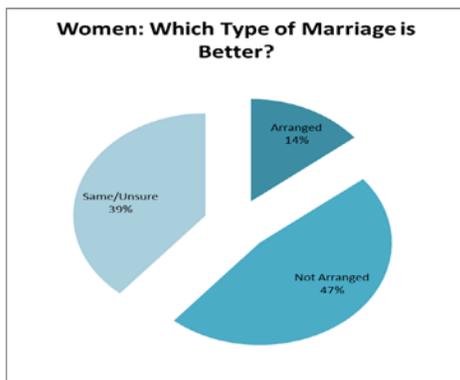
This conflict over marital choice also included widespread attempts by parents to arrange marriages that were not wanted by their children. Our sample revealed that 88% of female respondents and 63% of males knew at least one person who had refused to allow parents to arrange a marriage for them. It is not clear the degree to which this represents rejection of the idea of arranged marriages, the actuality of particular proposed matches, or individuals conflicting with parents over “when”, rather than how.

When asked why the people they know refused to marry 50% of the responses suggested concerns with the overall process of parents making the marital decision

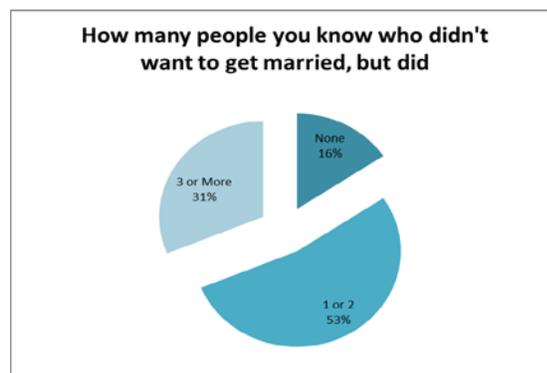


(Americanized and fear of commitment), 19% suggested a problem with the particulars of proposed matches, and 31% provided answers that are ambiguous and difficult to interpret: “too young” and “educational goals”.

Respondents described numerous cases of both men and women facing significant pressure from parents and other family members over marital choice. However, women were more conscious of and concerned with potential problems with arranged marriage, as demonstrated by both the greater number who know of at least one person who had refused an arranged marriage and the smaller percentage who viewed arranged marriages as “better.”



Respondents often gave conflicting and ambivalent answers around issues connected to dating and sexual propriety. For example, nearly half reported that it is useful to live together before marriage, over two thirds reported it as “socially unacceptable”, and 100% said that their parents would not allow it. Finally, eighty-four percent indicated that they



knew somebody who had not wanted to be married, but had done so anyway, suggesting that intergenerational conflict over marital choice is a significant issue for young adults from MENASA migrant families.

Marriage and Honor Conflict in New York City

In the following pages we present qualitative data to document and describe the type of familial conflicts over marital choice described by respondents. We intentionally avoided asking respondents if their parents had tried to pressure them into a marriage, due to the angry and defensive responses to such questions that we encountered in field trials of the interview instrument. However, the question “Do you know anybody who refused to get married?” yielded a common off-the-cuff first response, which was “yes, me.” Sometimes, the respondent backed away from this first response and indicated it was a joke or exaggeration. Other times respondents described nearly succumbing to a marriage they had not wanted. In two cases (see first section, below) this question elicited narratives about the respondent’s own marriage.

Of those respondents who said that they knew people who had “refused to get married,” when asked to “tell us about them,” respondents generally described outcomes in which the “girl ran away”, rather than ones in which violence occurred. Honor and endogamy were widely described as important to parental decisions about marriage and numerous examples were given of children struggling to balance lives in the society in which they were raised with their parents’ ties to the sending country.

In the following section we recount examples of marriages that were made despite the objections of one of the principals. In the subsequent section we recount examples of resistance and concern around potential violence that may be the backdrop to some family decisions.

Marital Conflict and Obedience

Jemma³, a Bangladeshi woman from the Bronx, New York, one of only four married respondents, told us her story of agreeing to a marriage made by her parents. She reported returning home one night from her job as a cashier in a local drug store. Her father surprised her with the news that she was getting married that summer to a young Bangladeshi man that her father “respected and admired.” The arrangements were already made and a date was finalized for the wedding. Jemma said that at the time, she was completely distraught and resented her father for not discussing any marriage arrangements with her. She “cried for days and weeks,” but was constantly reassured by her mother, aunts and other extended female family members that there was no need to worry because all of their marriages were arranged and had turned out well, and that hers would, too.

Jemma eventually decided that she would get married because she did not want to go against her father’s will or “build a reputation as the immodest daughter” in her family and community. Jemma went on to say that, today, she is raising a daughter with the young man that her father selected and reports to be very happy. She said her husband is

³ All names have been changed to protect respondents’ privacy.

everything she could ever ask for in a partner, and that her father was right and she is glad she “went along with his plans.”

A young Bangladeshi student, Fatima, reported that her father arranged her marriage before she started college. Although a wedding date was not confirmed, she was expected to marry a distant cousin after completing her undergraduate studies. In her senior year of college, Fatima’s father died from cancer. Soon after, Fatima’s mother asked whether she was ready for the marriage that her father had arranged before his passing. Fatima said that she replied that she wanted to complete her undergraduate studies before thinking about marriage.

Her mother was ambivalent, but supportive of her decision. She warned that if Fatima did not want to get married, she should decide immediately so that the cousin’s family could be notified and her family could “save face”. Her mother added that in Bangladesh, “your father’s word is the family’s honor,” and if her decisions were not parallel to her father’s promises, then the family could no longer “show face” in the community and her father would not be able to rest in peace. Despite the offer from her mother to cancel the arrangement, Fatima said that she felt emotionally and mentally pressured to follow through on her dead father’s arrangements. A few hours after the conversation, she told her mother that she would get married. She expects to be married shortly after her graduation.

Zalina, also Bangladeshi and Muslim, reported that during her freshman year of college, her parents caught her and her boyfriend together in a public setting. Zalina’s boyfriend at the time was also Muslim and Bangladeshi, but her parents did not permit

her to date. Zalina's parents demanded that she stop dating her boyfriend. Soon afterwards they decided to take Zalina to Bangladesh and arrange a marriage for her before her behavior damaged the family's reputation. Zalina complied with their demands; she broke off her relationship with her boyfriend, moved to Bangladesh, married a young man that her parents selected, got pregnant shortly after marriage and moved back to the US to have the baby. She is now attending college again, raising a daughter by herself and said that she finds it "extremely difficult to balance the life of a mother, wife, and student." Her husband is still living in Bangladesh; Zalima added that "married life is miserable" and that she "wouldn't wish it upon [her] worst enemy."

Marital Conflict and Resistance

Over the course of the interviews, it became apparent that there were strategies that might be used to sabotage an unwanted arranged marriage without open conflict. Our view into these strategies was sharpened in an interview with Sammy, a 21 year old who was born in Yemen, but who moved to NYC in early childhood with his mother. His father had come in 1979. Both parents had high school educations. Sammy described himself as "highly Americanized", but gave no hint at the conflict that this caused him at home until we asked him late in the interview whether it was "useful or desirable to live together before getting married." Sammy said that he was currently engaged and facing this problem: he has no idea what his future wife looks like or anything about her. He clearly did not want to go through with the marriage, but he did not seem to know how to scuttle his family's marriage plans for him.

However, Sammy told us about a young woman he knew whose story seemed to hold some hope for him. Mona was born in the US of Yemeni parents and her marriage had been arranged by her family to a man from Yemen, Zac. She never voiced her opposition to the marriage because, as Sammy noted, she “didn’t want to make her family look bad.” Rather than confront the family’s plans for her and risk a backlash, she was “obedient”, accepted her fate and got married. However, Sammy said that she never got pregnant and that she encouraged her friends to “spread rumors about her in the Yemeni community that she was too Americanized” to be a suitable marriage partner. Sammy reported that the marriage was “dissolved” within two years and that she had somehow managed to satisfy her family’s demand that she get married while gaining her freedom in the process. For Sammy, Mona’s escape from the marriage provided him hope that there was a way out for him.

Later, by chance, we interviewed Mona – the same woman whose experience was described by Sammy. When asked about her marriage, she said that she was “confused and didn’t want to get married,” but was “talked into it by her mother.” After the Niqa was signed, the couple was “married in the eyes of the families,” but they didn’t live together, a common arrangement for newlyweds. Over the next few months, however, Zac began to call Mona on the phone and occasionally visit her at her parents’ house, but she was not responsive to his efforts to develop a relationship and often would not take his calls or allow him to visit her. She reported that her mother became complicit in this during her parents’ divorce.

Her father had become increasingly angry at her mother’s “Americanization”, which according to her meant learning to read, driving a car, and becoming more engaged

with American culture. Eventually, Mona asked Zac for a divorce and his family agreed, but demanded the money that had changed hands when the agreement was settled be returned – by the now estranged father. She and her mother had lost enough honor to facilitate their divorces without ongoing conflict or violence.

A 21 year old female respondent who had been born in Pakistan, but grew up in the United States, described a situation in which her brother had several times been threatened by his parents over marital choice. In this case, the threat was a mutual suicide by the parents if he did not agree to marry a woman in Pakistan who he had never met. Fearing that the situation would explode into some type of violence, he travelled to Pakistan and went through with the marriage. However, he was expected to eventually help bring her to the United States and obtain residence papers for her. Instead, he moved to Seattle for a job and did nothing to bring his wife from Pakistan and would not return her phone calls. She began calling his parents, who again threatened to kill themselves if he did not bring his wife to the United States and consummate the marriage. He finally “stood up for himself and divorced her, to be happy and not be so stressed”. Meanwhile, his sister expressed fear that her parents were planning the same thing for her. Her fear was that she might not be able to escape as her brother had, but her hope was that her brother would intervene to protect her, despite living three thousand miles away.

We encountered one situation in which the typical conflict over arranged marriages was inverted with a child pressuring her parents to arrange a marriage. Jasmine was a 21 year old girl born in the United States to liberal and educated Palestinian parents who had come to the United States in the 1980s to finish their education – the mother high school and the father college. Her parents prided themselves on being cosmopolitan

and liberal. They were strongly opposed to arranged marriages and had raised their daughter with the expectation that she would wait until she had finished school to marry and start a life of her own.

Jasmine was overweight, terrified of dating, and had been trying to pressure her parents into arranging a marriage for her, as more traditional families in the neighborhood had done for their daughters. Her parents had little familiarity with marriage markets and opposed her desires, leading her to claim that they were ruining her life. She went on to describe a conflict involving her 22 year old first cousin who had eloped with an unemployed African American man. As the cousin's relationship became a topic of gossip among neighbors and community members, Jasmine's aunt and uncle became increasingly concerned with family honor. They told people who asked about their daughter that she had been kidnapped. When the daughter finally returned home to claim her possessions, they held her under lock and key for three days, until she finally called the police, who apparently viewed this as a problem of ultra-traditional Arab parents.

Discourses about ultra-traditionalism and honor violence sometimes accompanied interviews in surprising ways. Several times, when a good rapport had been established between a respondent and an interviewer from a similar MENASA background, informal joking discussions ensued after the interview about what it would take for their fathers, uncles or brothers to become violent. Jokes expressed both affection for and critique of family members, especially males. In one paradigmatic case the respondent and her interviewer related ordinary behavior to the possibility of hyperbolic and stereotypical overreactions, saying "my father promised that if I don't wear purple sweaters he won't

have my brother kill me” to which the interviewer responded humorously, “your father lets you wear sweaters?”

These discussions seemed to glory in the freedom to mock traditionalist behavior, but also reflected unease, ambivalence, and uncertainty about the limits of being “Americanized”. An equally powerful theme in these discussions was the sense of ethnic belonging famously described by Michael Herzfeld (2004) as “cultural intimacy”, or “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality”. In expressing this cultural intimacy, they seemed to be sharing an experience of testing and affirming their ambivalence and uncertainty about their social position between two cultures.

Conclusion: Unease, Ambivalence, Conflict, and Pride

Respondents described a widespread pattern of conflict and ambivalence over honor and culture for themselves and their social networks. Most of it involved bickering over seemingly pedestrian and not atypical parent/child concerns such as who the neighbors saw them walking with, what they were wearing, how they addressed a relative or neighbor or what they did after school. Many of these ambivalent bi-cultural actors wanted to be thoroughly “Americanized” and yet often conceded to cultural norms that they viewed as alien to their upbringing in New York City. Parents were typically described as facing similar dilemmas involving ambivalence, cultural confusion, and interculturality: valuing their children’s success at integrating into the receiving society

and rewarding academic accomplishments, especially among women, but often living in fear of the judgments of neighbors with whom they shared migrant enclaves.

In our small sample of 100 university students at the City University of New York, we spoke with what are likely to be among the most “Americanized” youth from MENASA families. Even among this privileged acculturated vanguard the possibility of being pressured into an unwanted marriage is a significant concern and the overwhelming majority knew individuals who they believed had made marriages they did not want. Several respondents presented narratives in which full consent by both principals to a marriage was questionable and nearly all had examples of everyday family conflicts over behavior, values, and cultural affiliation. This suggests a high probability that forced marriage is a problem for some young people in the United States. However, it is worth noting some socio-political differences from Europe that may make the question of forced marriage more complex and difficult to address in the US context.

The lack of a comprehensive compact between individuals and the state makes the nuclear family more important in the United States than in other Western democracies. Young people obtain their healthcare from parents until they are 26 years old, are expected to depend on natal families for financial support in tertiary education, often earn an unsubsidized minimum wage when they work, and cannot obtain “the dole” when they do not – just to name a few examples of the structural privileging of nuclear family. This far greater dependence on the nuclear family than in other Western democracies gives young people, especially females, fewer resources for negotiating with their families over marital choice.

We hypothesize that these differences may make the explosive conflicts that have been described in Europe as “forced marriage” less common, since US based MENASA youth may be resigned to more dependency and compromise than their European counterparts with greater citizenship entitlements. However, it likely means that American youth in general face greater constraints in their marital choices than their counterparts in other Western nations with more developed relationships between the individual and the state. For this reason we believe that further research into the topic should address the question of marriage and the degree of choice or consent, rather than “forced marriage”. The term is generally taken as invidious and often creates intense defensiveness in those being studied, because it injures their sense of ethnic pride and predefines the experiences of MENASA youth as different, more problematic, and incomparable to those of more mainstream Americans. It also creates dichotomous categories that may obscure more than they reveal about the marital choices that young adults from migrant backgrounds face.

Given that the sample was obtained through random intercept in public spaces and that 84% of respondents were willing to describe situations in which individuals in their social networks had married despite not wanting to, the research demonstrates that, with or without an explicit forced marriage policy from the US government, significant opportunities exist for concerned social service and educational providers to engage and support MENASA youth around the important topic of marital choice and consent.

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