

# Marrying Young

An exploratory study of young  
Muslim women's decision-making  
around early marriage



AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
*Equality without Exception*

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# Executive summary

The research project *Marrying Young: An exploratory study of young Muslim women's decision-making around early marriage* was developed by the AMWCHR in response to an observed increase in the number of young Muslim women choosing to marry at a very young age.

This project sought to examine factors leading to young women disengaging from education and employment and to gain a better understanding of the decision-making process for choosing to marry young. The AMWCHR also sought to identify the impact of marrying young on health, psychosocial wellbeing and community participation.

A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted by the AMWCHR to enhance understanding of how young women make the decision to marry, as well as to identify strategies that encourage their continued engagement in school.

The research project engaged 221 Muslim women – young women as well as older women from the community; of these, sixteen Muslim women had experienced forced early marriage. Service sector professionals working directly with Muslim young people or their families were also consulted.

This research established that positive change was occurring, with the value of education for young women increasingly being recognised within the community and young women expected to exercise a great deal of agency over their lives in terms of pursuing education, career and other life aspirations.

Nonetheless, the research identified that socio-economic, religious, community and familial expectations and pressures continue to preserve an early marriage pathway as the most important option available to young Muslim women.

Young women who did not experience early marriage, or did not know anyone affected by it, did not necessarily find the practice problematic. Indeed, many young Muslim women who participated in the research project expected to be engaged from the age of eighteen years onwards and to be married by their early twenties.

There is a significant contrast between the views of young women and the women from the community who had

already experienced early marriage. Women from the community were far more aware of the impact of early marriage, and expressed reservations about the capacity of young women to make informed decisions about marriage.

The research demonstrated that young women experienced significant barriers to informed decision-making in relation to early marriage. Additionally, many young women had limited access to the information and support required to understand and pursue vocational options and other personal aspirations.

All research participants who had been forced into early marriage identified the practice as harmful.

This research demonstrated that entry into early and forced marriage was a complex and varied process. Resisting unwanted marriages had significant consequences for young women including isolation from family, removal from school and family stigma.

However, the consequences of early and forced marriage could be far more severe. Women forced into marriage lived with physical and emotional violence. Both those who managed to resist early and forced marriage and those forced into marriage described profound consequences to their self-esteem and sense of self.

The practice of early and forced marriage is driven primarily by economic deprivation, a desire to keep families intact and maintenance of cultural identity and community inclusion. Hence, strategies to eradicate the practice must prioritise capacity-building of young Muslim women, as well as family and community education programs.

Women, particularly those affected by early and forced marriage, felt that the service system lacks meaningful options for young women and that their unique cultural and social location in Australia was inadequately understood.

Young women wanted tailored support and capacity building programs, and importantly more targeted support by schools in relation to education and employment pathways.

## Recommendations

The following strategic directions have emerged through this research. They prioritise a strengths-based approach, which enables change that is led and determined by Muslim women and communities.

### Strategic directions

#### 1. Women's leadership program

That a women's leadership program is developed and established engaging younger and older Muslim women to enable discussions in safe spaces. This program could explore women's rights, economic independence, educational/vocational pathways, reproductive health and healthy relationships within the cultural framework of women's lives.

#### 2. Vocational advice

That a tailored educational/vocational advice program is established in schools that recognises the unique challenges young Muslim women face and the potential consequences for young women who do not have educational or vocational options. This program should target young Muslim women from year 10 onwards.

#### 3. Legal rights awareness

That legal education and legal rights-awareness programs are developed for Muslim youth and delivered in safe settings that enable young people to engage and learn in an empowering way.

#### 4. Muslim women's network

That a network of successful Muslim women is established as role models for young Muslim women. This network could:

- present at school careers days
- host events that engage young women in positive settings
- mentor young Muslim women
- set up a social media network to engage and inspire young women.

#### 5. Community education

That a community education initiative be rolled out for the Muslim community on early and forced marriage, with special emphasis on both federal and state laws that potentially impact on the marriage of young women and men. This should include the development of audio, online and written information for the community.

A specialised training program should be developed for community and religious leaders focusing on Australian law. This education program should address migration law, and rights and protections available to young people who are sponsoring potential spouses or are being sponsored by an Australian citizen.

#### 6. Parenting programs

That parenting programs targeted to Muslim communities adopt a strengths-based approach. This program needs to engage with cultural norms that support the practice of early and forced marriage.

#### 7. Professional development

That a professional development program is developed for teachers, caseworkers and other professionals working directly with young Muslim women. Such a program would equip workers with the skills to recognise, respond to and refer potential cases of early marriage appropriately. This should include a cultural competency component and address socio-economic factors driving early and forced marriage. This professional development program should also introduce participants to the relationship between Islam and early marriage.

#### 8. Specialist services funding

That specialist services within the affected communities are recognised and adequately funded to support young Muslim women and their mothers, particularly those at risk of early and forced marriage.

# Introduction

## The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) is an organisation of Muslim women working to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia.

The Muslim community in Australia is characterised by diversity and hybridity; there is no binding vision of Islam or what it means to be Muslim. Therefore, the AMWCHR is a non-religious organisation reflecting the cultural, linguistic and sectarian diversity within the Australian Muslim community.

The ultimate purpose of our organisation and the belief that informs the AMWCHR's work is that Muslim women's equality should be:

- without exception
- without qualification
- without threat.

## Project summary

The *Marrying Young: An exploratory study of young Muslim women's decision-making around early marriage* research project was developed by the AMWCHR in response to an observed increase in the number of young Muslim women choosing to marry at very young ages<sup>1</sup>.

The project sought to examine factors leading to young women disengaging from education and employment and choosing to marry young. Additionally, the AMWCHR sought to identify the impact of marrying young on health, psychosocial wellbeing and community participation.

The AMWCHR conducted a qualitative, exploratory study in an effort to enhance understanding of why young women make this decision, as well as to identify strategies that encourage continued engagement in school. The project methodology included focus groups, in-depth interviews and questionnaires.

## Project funding

The project was funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation.

The charitable purpose of the funding was to advance knowledge of the factors leading to young Muslim women disengaging from education and marrying at an early age.

## Project objectives

The key objectives of the *Marrying Young: An exploratory study of young Muslim women's decision-making around early marriage* project were to:

- explore the emotional and cognitive aspect of young Muslim women's decision-making about when and who to marry
- explore Muslim women's understanding of marriage and its implications for their future educational, employment and civic opportunities, and its impact on their health and wellbeing
- develop strategies for assisting young Muslim women to avoid early marriage and invest in their future and education.

## Defining early marriage

*Early marriage* (sometimes known as child marriage) which, in most cases<sup>2</sup>, is defined as the marriage of anyone under the age of eighteen, is also often considered a form of forced marriage. The right to 'free and full' consent to a marriage is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the understanding that consent cannot be 'free and full' when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner or to take on the responsibility of a marital relationship and family. In addition to consent, responsibilities such as managing a significant relationship, pregnancy and childbirth are not considered age-appropriate for girls who are married early.

1 For the purposes of this study 'young ages' refers to young women who are still at secondary school.

2 While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) classifies a child to be a girl or boy under the age of 18, many countries, including those who are signatories to the CRC, have different and much younger age limits legally defining a 'child' and the minimum age to marry.

Within non-Western contexts, early marriage is not understood to be synonymous with forced marriage. Depending on the age of the young person, usually 16 and over, many cultures believe there are clear distinctions between the two terms.

In these cultural/country contexts, an early marriage can involve forced marriage or can be an arranged marriage.

A forced marriage can be defined as:

*A marriage where a person gets married without fully and freely consenting because they have been threatened, coerced or deceived. A person can be coerced through obvious means such as force, detention or duress, or through a more subtle means like psychological oppression, abuse of power or taking advantage of the person's vulnerability.*<sup>3</sup>

In both forced and arranged marriages the potential marriage partner is identified by parents and/or extended family members. An arranged marriage is distinguishable from a forced marriage in that the willingness and voluntary consent of both parties is essential to the decision.

Consent in marriage means that the woman freely allows, is in favour of, or agrees to a marriage of her own accord and without pressure. Consent is an act of reason and deliberation, and assumes that the young woman has power and the absolute right to refuse the marriage without fear of consequences. Real consent is unaffected by pressure, emotional blackmail, fear and manipulation.<sup>4</sup>

Qualitative data collected throughout this project suggests that both arranged and forced marriage situations feature in early marriage within Australian Muslim communities.

## Project methodology

The following methodological approach was adopted to undertake the research project:

- Development of research tools including:
  - information sheet about the project
  - individual interview questions
  - focus group questions
  - questionnaire for young women.

- Implementation of in-depth interviews with young women and mothers.
- Focus groups involving:
  - young women
  - teachers and welfare officers from Victorian schools with a high Muslim population
  - Muslim women from a range of ethnic backgrounds.
- Distribution of a detailed questionnaire for young women.

This project relied heavily on qualitative data collection and community cooperation. It is important to highlight the existence of deep suspicions and misgivings about discussing early marriage outside Muslim communities. Many research participants stated that the issue is regularly misrepresented and sensationalised by welfare services, the media and other mainstream sources. Such misgivings in the Muslim community, particularly among young women, presented significant barriers to the completion of this project.

The research would not have been possible without the AMWCHR's existing community networks and trusted relationships that have evolved over many years of ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Even so, project staff encountered strong hesitation among young women in particular to discuss the issue honestly and openly. A range of approaches and methodological adaptations were required throughout the project to enable in-depth qualitative data to be collected. This is discussed further in Section 4 of the report.

## Structure of this report

This report is set out under the following sections:

- Summary of qualitative data and key findings from in-depth interviews with young women and mothers.
- Summary of qualitative data and key findings from focus groups.
- Summary of qualitative data and key findings from questionnaire.
- Analysis and proposed strategies for assisting young women to avoid early marriage and invest in their future and education.

Project research tools are attached as Appendices.

3 See Attorney-General's Department, *Forced Marriage: Fact Sheet for Media* at [www.ag.gov.au/CrimeAndCorruption/HumanTrafficking/Documents/ForcedMarriageFactSheetForMedia.pdf](http://www.ag.gov.au/CrimeAndCorruption/HumanTrafficking/Documents/ForcedMarriageFactSheetForMedia.pdf)

4 West's Encyclopedia of American Law, i, s.v. 'Consent'; William Burton, *Burton's Legal Thesaurus* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2008), 124.

# Women who married early: Individual interviews with Muslim women

A total of sixteen (16) in-depth individual interviews were conducted with Muslim women. The interviews aimed to explore the dynamics of, and reasons for, marrying early.

The AMWCHR sought to interview women who married young, without expecting women to specify whether those marriages were forced or consensual. However, in commencing interviews with participants, it became clear that all interviewees for this part of the research project were forced into marriage.

## Interview themes

The following themes were explored in interviews (a full list of interview questions is attached as Appendix 2):

- life aspirations as young women
- attitudes and perceptions towards marriage and husbands as young women
- family attitudes towards marriage
- family aspirations for their daughters
- marriage experiences and extent of individual choice/decision-making
- impact of marriage on lives and wellbeing
- attitudes towards early marriage.

## Demographic features

Sixteen women from a range of ethnic groups and age ranges were interviewed. The age groups of interviewees ranged from 18 years to 52 years old:

- 18 years 2 interviewees
- 20 – 25 4 interviewees
- 26 – 29 1 interviewee
- 30 – 35 2 interviewees
- 36 – 39 1 interviewee
- 40 – 45 2 interviewees
- 46 – 50 2 interviewees
- 50 – 55 2 interviewees

Countries of origin included Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. Thirteen women were born overseas and three were born in Australia. All 16 women had been exposed to early marriage and 14 of these were mothers.

## Age at marriage

Interviewee age at time of marriage	Age of husband at time of marriage	Where marriage took place	Additional information
(first engagement at 15 years)	(fiancé age 21 years)	Australia	
18 years	24 years	Australia	
20 years	24 years	Australia	Husband arrived on spousal visa
16	23	Overseas	
16	29	Overseas	Wife arrived on spousal visa
17	41	Overseas	Wife arrived on spousal visa
17	28	Overseas	Husband arrived on spousal visa
17	25	Overseas	Wife arrived on spousal visa
14	33	Overseas	
17	21	Overseas	Wife arrived on spousal visa
18	28	Australia	
16	25	Overseas	Wife arrived on spousal visa
16	26	Overseas	
16	28	Overseas	Wife arrived on spousal visa
17	28	Australia	
17	30	Australia	



## Life aspirations as young women

Overwhelmingly, the majority of interviewees held future aspirations for further study and careers during their youth. Examples of career pathways women wanted to follow as young girls included dermatology, psychology, medicine, teaching and working in the travel industry so 'I could fly everywhere and see the world'. However, with the exception of two interviewees these aspirations were never pursued.

The following factors prevented interviewees from pursuing further education:

- lack of parental support (a number of interviewees explained that their parents were reluctant to allow them to go to university because of perceived 'threats' posed by an environment influenced by independence and socialisation with males)
- interrupted schooling caused by extended periods of living overseas or by war or conflict
- negative experiences in the secondary education system as a result of racism
- lack of exposure to information or pathways for post-secondary education
- cultural expectations that marriage was the only post-secondary school option
- carer responsibilities for younger siblings which prevented study.

The following quotes highlight the range of experiences shared by interviewees:

*'We went to live overseas when I was twelve and I was gone for five years. I did really well in the school system overseas but when we returned I could not write well in English. I wanted to be independent and continue studying but I was not allowed to. I bought a car but was not even allowed to drive to the homes of family members. I had no independence of movement.'*

*'I think I had suppressed any thoughts of myself defined as an individual as I was caring for a large number of younger siblings and our home was always filled with extended family members. There was no time or privacy to think of anything other than getting through the day. By the time I was in year 12 I was just trying to make it through. I had not been exposed to any other options other than marriage and didn't question this as I didn't know any different.'*

*'I had so many dreams. I wanted to be a doctor but the war started and they shut down my school. I never thought about*

*marriage and I didn't want to get married but my parents insisted.'*

*'I loved to study and when I was younger I wanted to be a teacher. I thought I would have a good life if I had an education. When we came to Australia I tried to study dentistry but it all became too hard after I got married because there were so many expectations of me at home. I didn't think I was going to get married, I just thought that I would continue university.'*

## Attitudes and perceptions towards marriage and husbands as young women

As young women, most interviewees had very little exposure to men and little understanding of what a marriage involved.

*'I had no thoughts about boys even at that age because there were no boys around anyway and because religiously and culturally we were very strict. There was no possibility of romantic interaction with boys so it didn't figure in my mind.'*

*'I never thought about marriage. I didn't know what it meant. I never understood what marriage was. Islam doesn't talk about sex.'*

Whilst the majority of interviewees could not recall thinking about marriage as young women, some saw marriage as an opportunity to escape the isolation and confinement that represented their existing lives.

*'I don't think I wanted to marry but I wanted to be in a relationship and have someone to spend time with. I wanted someone that was rebellious and didn't want our traditional culture. I was forced to be around extended family only and wanted to be away from all of it.'*

*'I didn't think about a husband but I was thinking about marriage because I wanted to get out of home. I was lost in the family and saw it as an outlet.'*

Socio-economic positioning was also a factor in influencing how young women perceived marriage and the extent to which they were encouraged to marry at an early age.

*'My father was always clear that marriage was not an option. He and mum married young and migrated because their parents couldn't really look after them. He wanted his children to get an education and achieve academically. This was his goal because he came from a great deal of economic deprivation and never wanted us to experience this. He saw education as the only way to escape poverty.'*



The lack of exposure to alternative options appeared to be the most influential factor in encouraging women to consider marriage at an early age.

*'There was no guidance from teachers about options and I didn't see any choices. I had no advice on what else I could do. From a family perspective I had to finish school but there was nothing beyond that.'*

*'I had a lot of trouble fitting in at school. People did not know much about Muslims back then but I got teased about being a 'wog'. I had no definitive or tangible plans for the future – nobody treated me like I had a future. I saw a film that inspired me to learn more about psychology. I was determined in my thirst for knowledge after this but it was not an easy path.'*

*'I remember the careers advisor spending like 10 minutes with me on my course selection sheet. It was really obvious that she didn't think I was going to make it into Uni. Ultimately she was wrong, but if she'd been right, she didn't bother to tell me what my options were.'*

## Family attitudes towards marriage

With the exception of two interviewees, all women explained that marriage was expected by their families and was often arranged to coincide with the completion of secondary education or late teenage years. For those who were married overseas, a Muslim marital ceremony had already been held prior to their completion of secondary schooling.

In the two examples where pressure for early marriage did not feature, this was influenced by paternal attitudes and socio-economic circumstances.

*Dad mocked marriage proposals. It wasn't an issue. He wanted us to go to university because he thought education would save us from poverty and hunger.*

Where mothers had become widowed, the pressure on their daughters to marry early appeared to intensify. This was evident even in cases where the father had preferred his daughters to achieve academic success. Once the paternal figure was no longer present, mothers saw their situation and that of their daughters as being far more vulnerable within the community.

*'There was no talk of marriage at all. Dad had lived through such deprivation that not getting an education was not an option. He had to watch Mum go and ask others for food and he didn't want his kids to ever go through this. He didn't have an education so continued to struggle financially. He was consumed by wanting his children to never suffer the way he did because of*

*poverty. He saw education as the key to financial freedom. But then Father died when I was 17 years old. My mum was alone and there was pressure to get married early. We were a house full of single women and there was a lot of talk and gossip about women without husbands.'*

*'Mum tried to marry me off when I was fifteen. She only stopped because I threatened suicide. I couldn't talk to her directly as she would not listen but I got the message to her through my grandmother.'*

*'The pressure to marry was constant. I was even being pressured to go overseas to get married because marriage proposals weren't coming in while living in Australia. We were kept so isolated because mum feared community gossip and no one knew me.'*

In most cases, however, early marriage appeared to be a cultural expectation by both parents and often with the support of extended family members. The following examples illustrate the experiences of women involved in this study.

*'There was so much war at the time. My grandfather picked our husband when we were born. I had no choice. My dad just said 'You're married'. The whole thing was done without my knowledge.'*

*'I was engaged at 14 and married at 16. I didn't want to get married but my parents wanted it. I couldn't say no because it was very important to them.'*

*'My parents said yes to a marriage proposal so I had to agree. They brought my husband home and I was very upset. I told my mum I didn't like this man but she said this was our culture so I had no choice.'*

*'Marriage was important to my mother. She picked our husbands. I was in year 10 and wanted to study more but was pressured to marry. I didn't eat for a week and was crying. My mum, uncle and grandma pressured me to marry.'*

*'Within a month of arriving in Australia I received many marriage proposals. My father didn't want me to marry but then his friend proposed and he agreed because the friend was a good person. My parents were happy. They liked my husband and they chose him. I was in year 11 when I got married and I kept studying after marriage.'*

*'I didn't want to marry, I wanted to study. My family wanted and expected me to get married. Many things prevented me from doing further study. This included money and my family worried that I would mix with boys after high school.'*

*'I never developed as a person because I was married so young. It was normal in the community to get married that early but not anymore. My auntie convinced my mum that it was the best thing for me.'*

Whilst the pressure for young women to accept marriage proposals was evident in discussions with women, many young women who were not receiving marriage proposals by their late teens experienced even greater pressure to secure a marriage.

*'I was made to feel like it was my fault that I hadn't been proposed to by the time I was eighteen. I thought it was my fault and I was doing something wrong because no boy wanted to marry me. I know that was wrong now but it has taken many many years to understand this.'*

## Family aspirations for their daughters

With the exception of two cases where fathers wanted their daughters to pursue post-secondary education, marriage appeared to be the most prominent aspiration families held for their daughters. Even in situations where parents suggested they wanted their daughters to undertake tertiary study, young women were still pressured to enter early marriages.

*'Mum spoke about me going to university but never allowed for it to happen. Although I applied and wanted to go to university there were fights with mum every morning which made it impossible to study or keep living that way.'*

*'My parents weren't against education but they worried that I would be more educated than boys in the community and it would reduce my marriage prospects.'*

*'As a widow Mum wanted to marry us girls off as soon as possible to reduce community gossip. Our family made us feel that the best thing we could do was get married to lessen her load. It was OK to go to uni as long as I was married. I remember this being negotiated with my fiancé and he agreed.'*

## Marriage experiences and extent of individual choice/decision-making

Whilst the marriage experience varied for individual women involved in this study, there were a number of consistent factors that featured across their personal histories. These included:

- Significant pressure to agree to marriage at an early age
- Health impacts related to being coerced into relationships
- Isolation/rejection by family where young women attempted to reject marriage proposals
- Lack of choice/independent decision-making
- Being lured into marriage situations before realising they could not back out
- Attempts at suicide by women forced into marriages they did not want.

Of the 16 women interviewed in this study, only two had managed to break off engagements when they were young women. In both cases, the consequences of doing so resulted in diminished relationships with immediate and extended family members and social isolation within the community. The repercussions of rejecting 'cultural' practice were significant for both women and impacted their family relationships for many years.

A significant pattern that emerged from these interviews was that many of the women who were unable to pursue their aspirations for further study as young women have returned to study later in life.

## Case studies

The following case studies document marriage experiences of a number of women involved in the study and include examples of early marriage both in Australia and overseas.

(All names have been changed to protect the identity of interviewees.)

### Case study 1: Aliya

Aliya was first engaged at 15 years of age and only managed to break the engagement by threatening to take her own life if she was forced into marriage. Her second marriage proposal was made in her late teens and Aliya initially agreed as a result of family pressure because it was the only offer her family had received since her first engagement. Whilst the fiancé was considered a bad choice within the community, Aliya's mother insisted she was 'lucky' that a man wanted her. The engagement only lasted a short time. Aliya believes this was because she had her own opinions and was confident in expressing her views. Aliya's relationship with her mother deteriorated even further after a second failed engagement and whilst she continued to live in the family home, she experienced isolation and rejection by her family.

*It was hard to make friends and go out and meet people because of restrictions to movement imposed by my mother. If I had different options and had some skills and independence I would have waited for the right person. I was emotionally abused in a way that prevented development of social skills.*

Aliya finally married in her late twenties, accepting a marriage proposal only because she wanted to have children and knew this was not an option for her outside of marriage. Whilst her husband still carries 'traditional' views she believes that as a mature woman she is better equipped to challenge these and she has greater control of her life and choices in raising her children than she would have had as a younger woman.

*I got a sense of freedom after marriage but my husband is still traditional. I only felt my greatest independence after my child was born. There are cultural differences with my husband as he was brought up traditionally overseas. The biggest challenge is around raising children. We don't see eye to eye about raising children. Still he is a good man and he tries very hard to adapt to me and the way I want to do things.*

### Case study 2: Amal

Amal's first marriage was at eighteen years of age. At the time Amal was struggling with depression having experienced the death of her father and the loss of her sister who had married and had moved away. Amal was completing her last year of secondary school and given her home situation, she did not believe she would do well enough to gain entry into university.

The marriage proposal arrived through her future husband's father and Amal agreed. Amal believes she went along with the marriage because at the time she was depressed, traumatised by loss and changes in her family, was very insecure and lonely and did not believe she would have a pathway to further studies.

Once Amal agreed to proceed with the marriage, a Muslim/religious marital ceremony was held which acted as an engagement so she could meet her future husband and spend time alone with him.

*When I met my fiancé and had the chance to sit and talk with him I realised there was no attraction and we had nothing in common. I started having reservations but my mum explained it was only an engagement so we would have more time to get to know each other. I was panicked and felt that I just wanted to get away from him. My family was very traditional, I had little to no contact with men, it didn't occur to me that there needed to be an energy between a man and a woman, in fact I felt a bit repelled by him physically, it was strange. I know it's stupid, but when I agreed to marry him, I'd only seen him in the distance. When we became engaged and we started to sit together and talk, it occurred to me for the first time that I would have to have sex with this man, and I couldn't think of anything worse in the world. It wasn't his fault; as far as he was aware, I'd consented which must have meant that I liked him too. He was always a courteous and kind man to me.*

Because Amal had initially voluntarily agreed to the marriage she was afraid of speaking up and retracting her consent. Her family were strongly committed to the marriage going ahead as they considered it improved their status to marry into a highly respected family in the community. Amal knew that rejecting the marriage would

generate much gossip in the community and result in social humiliation for her family.

*I didn't tell anyone how I felt because I didn't understand how I could go from liking him to thinking I would kill myself if he touched me. Mum's school of thought was that if he doesn't beat you, doesn't womanise, doesn't gamble then there is no reason to end a relationship. I was the most depressed bride-to-be ever.*

During the engagement period, Amal received her secondary schooling study results and was accepted into university. Her mother agreed that she could continue her studies only on the proviso that she did not socialise at university and did not become 'modernised'.

Whilst Amal assumed she was still in an engagement period the religious ceremony which had taken place actually meant that she was married from a religious perspective.

*Girls are lured into engagements thinking it is a trial period but it is not. That's what my mum told me. Then pressure starts and you're told you can't break it off because you are religiously married and are tarnished by being around a man alone so it is not easy to break it off.*

As Amal attended university and became exposed to literature she had not previously accessed, she experienced a rapid growth in self-awareness and felt engaged with learning and exploring ideas and thoughts around how society worked.

*I was seduced by learning and just wanted to study and he had no education. I felt he would hold me back.*

University exposed Amal to a new world of opportunities but she felt trapped in a marriage that had been arranged by her family and she was terrified of speaking up. When she finally built up the courage to do so her family threatened to pull her out of university so Amal ran away from home. She returned two days later because of the significant distress expressed by her mother.

*I chose another life which was difficult for people to accept. It took exposure to education to understand I didn't want marriage. At the time I didn't want to be with anyone. By the time I broke off the marriage I had endured months of seclusion. My mum barely spoke to me and my family were anxious so they stayed away. It made me feel that I was a really awful person.*

As a result of Amal's actions her mother and family withdrew much of the intimacy she had previously had with them and despite slowly rebuilding family bonds over many years their relationship remains permanently changed.

Whilst Amal believes some of her experiences were due to abusive parenting by her mother, she does not discount the role of culture in what happened. Ending a marriage is considered as shaming the family from a cultural perspective. Allowing girls to pursue post-secondary studies is also seen as a risk because men do not want women who are more educated than them.

*In our community people would say that if you become more educated than boys in the community you will be putting yourself in an impossible situation as no man will want you. I was also told marriage was a religious obligation and there was no option not to marry.*

### Case study 3: Nawal

Nawal entered an arranged marriage at 20 years of age. The marriage was proposed by an extended family member who was keen to support another male relative wanting to migrate to Australia.

*The proposal was that he would come out and I would see if I liked him but the reality is that once you commit that's it!*

At the time of the marriage proposal Nawal saw this opportunity as a better option than remaining in her family home where her movement was restricted and her life revolved around caring for younger siblings. Although she wanted to undertake further studies she did not believe she had access to any pathways that would allow for this and saw marriage as the only option available to escape her current situation.

*I remember standing at the train station and seeing university students and really wanting to be one. But it was too late. My fiancé had already arrived in Australia and I was coaxed into it. That feeling of being a student is unresolved and has stayed in me. It has never quite left.*

Although Nawal feels her marriage has been successful and her husband has treated her well, she believes she has never had the opportunity to be a teenager or enjoy freedom as a young woman. She also believes her marriage has lasted because she wanted stability for her children.

*I was not forced into marriage but coerced and coaxed by circumstances because it is just what you do. It is the way it works in our culture.*

#### Case study 4: Zahra

Zahra was married in her country of origin at 16 years of age. She had no choice and was not given the opportunity to consent to the marriage. Zahra remembers crying continuously in the early days of her marriage but being afraid of speaking up. She became pregnant very early in her marriage and did not know anything about pregnancy or childbirth. Zahra had to live with her husband's extended family and care for her in-laws and the children of her husband's siblings.

*I had to work hard in the home for my mum-in-law. We have rights here, it's better here for women. I had to listen to my mum-in-law, father-in-law and sister-in-law. If I was older, I wouldn't listen. I had to raise so many children. It was so much hard work. I couldn't go to school.*

Once they moved to Australia, Zahra's husband drank, beat her and gambled all their income. She believes she was only able to leave him because in Australia she had access to rights and means of independence that were not accessible to women in her home country.

*In our homeland my husband wasn't good either. My parents had died and I couldn't go to my brother because he would have sold me to another man. He has never been a good man. He used to spit at me. He used to hit me.*

#### Case study 5: Padma

Padma was married in her home country at the age of 14 to a man more than twice her age. Her parents accepted the marriage proposal without asking Padma as he was considered a wealthy man with means to provide for her.

*I remember I was reading poetry then I heard clapping and party-like music. I was told I was going to get married. Then the in-laws came and put a shawl on me. I was scared. I took it off and ran off. Putting the shawl on my head symbolises the girl belonging to the in-laws. I ran to another room. Within a week I was living with my husband. My relatives were upset with my parents for marrying me early.*

Padma recalls that on the way to the wedding party her husband put her hand on a gun he was carrying in his pocket and threatened to kill her and her family if she did not go along with the ceremony. Padma remained in the marriage for three years and experienced ongoing abuse throughout this time. She was reluctant to end the marriage because of the cultural stigma that would be associated with divorce.

*The hardest time was when I was left alone with him. I kept pushing him away and then his family came to speak to my family and told them. They advised me to obey so I complied. I tried to kill myself by drinking pesticide. I was rushed to hospital to clean my stomach. Then I got pregnant. My parents wanted me to divorce when they saw what was happening but I refused because it's not good to be divorced. I stayed in the marriage for 3 years. He was beating me daily.*

Padma finally applied for divorce with the help of her family when her husband took on a second wife. At 21 years of age she married again via an arranged marriage. Padma believes this marriage has been more successful as her husband respects her and supported her to return to school and go on to university. They have been living in Australia for many years where she has been able to establish a career.

### Impact of marriage on lives and wellbeing

All women taking part in this study believed there were negative impacts on their lives and wellbeing as a direct result of early marriage. In addition to the long-term impacts of suicide attempts, women spoke of the emotional anguish involved in being coerced, and sometimes forced, into an early marriage as well as the impacts of early childbirth on their physical wellbeing.

Many of the women shared experiences of trauma as a result of entering an intimate relationship at an age where they had not yet developed psychological or physical maturity.

*'I was scared being married at such a young age. I didn't know what sex was and it was traumatic for me. It had a huge impact and made me see myself as an object.'*

*'I found it too painful marrying someone I found reprehensible.'*

*'Now I have health problems from being married young. It affects the body of a young girl. I feel like I'm an old woman.'*

*'Marrying young is not good for the health. The body is not ready so there are difficulties. No one explained about marriage. I was shocked and cried.'*

*'Marrying too young destroys the woman. All girls suffer. The body is young. Men can't prepare the girls.'*

Women also spoke of the physical impact of pregnancy and rearing children at a young age. Most believed that physical health issues they were experiencing as they aged were a direct result of multiple pregnancies and childbirth



at an early age, and having to rear children without any help from their husbands.

*'I have knee problems, back problems and diabetes. My first child was 5 months when I got pregnant again and I was still a child myself.'*

*'I have so many health problems because I had to run around working at home. My mother-in-law had seven children. I had to look after all the children. I had to wash so many clothes my arms would get sore.'*

*'I'm sick and depressed. I have heart problems. I suffer now from back pain as a result of babies and marriage. I had complications during my first pregnancy.'*

The psychological impacts shared by women in interviews suggested that the impact of early marriage on mental health was just as severe as the physical impacts.

*'My family wanted me to pull back and settle down just when I got started on life.'*

*'The pressure to get married made me really hate men and it took me a long time to see men as human beings.'*

*'It took over 20 years after the forced marriage to feel I could have a relationship with a man. I stayed alone all that time. It was a very difficult and painful time.'*

*'I didn't get a chance to explore who I was or what I wanted. I would watch people go to university and be unhappy that I didn't have the chance to experience it.'*

*'When you withdraw from an engagement, even when that engagement is forced, and you see your family humiliated in the community and you know everybody is gossiping about them, you feel really selfish and that you're not a good person for inflicting all this pain on them.'*

## Attitudes towards early marriage

*'Can it be banned? I would not recommend it.'*

The overwhelming majority of women who had experienced early marriage highlighted that they were against it. Those who had daughters of their own expressed that they would not consider or support early marriage for their children.

*'I would never get my girls married young. They are 17 and 16. I came here because I didn't want my daughters to go through what I did. I was a baby.'*

Most women believed that education was critical in offering younger women choices and the independence to make their own life decisions.

*'Without education you are always at the mercy of others.'*

*'I am raising my daughter differently. I am raising her to be respectful of religion but not allow men to take her power away.'*

*'I have realised that girls who have not been exposed to the workforce or university have the same attitudes as their mothers' generation. Girls that don't get out there after year 12 are stuck at home waiting for someone to come and ask to marry them. If they go to university they get a different perspective because they are exposed to the world.'*

Feedback highlighted that it was exposure to education that enabled some women to challenge cultural notions suggesting marriage was a religious obligation.

*'My mother had drummed into me that 'happiness has nothing to do with marriage – it is a religious obligation'. As I matured and studied my religion for myself I realised people were excusing inappropriate behaviour as a cultural or religious tradition to excuse their own behaviour.'*

A number of women spoke in-depth about the lack of access to other Muslim women as alternative role models within their community – women from whom they could draw the strength to consider life possibilities beyond marriage. Because many interviewees were socially isolated as young women and had very little access to information, they were not aware of alternative life pathways, and had not been exposed to Muslim women who had challenged 'cultural' practices and made independent choices.

*'Whenever I tried to get help, people would suggest I leave home. They didn't understand our culture and that this was not a real option for me. I wish I had access to Muslim women that got it.'*

*'What would have been helpful then would have been to see models of progressive Muslim women to model myself on and feel normal. Someone to speak to who would know what it would be like to be in those families and experience those things.'*

However, access to alternative role models appears to be changing as a result of an increasing number of professional Muslim women in the community, as well as access to technology which has enabled young Muslim women greater freedom to connect with information and social environments outside the family. The extent to which independent Muslim women have been accepted by their communities, though, remains an issue.



*'It is difficult to know what access young women have today because they are very savvy with technology.'*

*'There are now Muslim women living alone which would have been unheard of back then. More are developing a new way of being a Muslim woman; these women let you know that you have options as a young woman. But I do wonder if anyone in the community really accepts them.'*

A significant concern that was raised by a number of women was 'mainstream' intervention which often translates as non-Muslim women proposing that they can intervene culturally.

*'When I see all the stories today I think of non-Muslim women who want to 'save' Muslim women from their families.'*

This approach was considered highly offensive and denigrating to Muslim women as it suggested that they have no capacity for self-determination whilst also highlighting 'mainstream' ignorance around culture and other complex intersecting factors that influence Muslim women's lives. Stereotypes and assumptions, together with negative media messages targeting Muslim communities, are having detrimental consequences for young Muslim women.

*'Now Muslim girls are also being attacked by media and hearing "you are not normal because you are Muslim" and you're also hearing from your family "you are not normal if you don't want to marry". It's a toxic combination.'*

*'Young girls are being pulled into the Australian services and workers with no exposure to other Muslim women who have refused marriage. They are not being given the option of meeting strong Muslim women. Nothing, nothing can replace that.'*

## Summary

Individual interviews with Muslim women conducted as part of this project indicated that as young women they had been married early and that their views, beliefs, self-aspirations, consent and preparedness for marriage were not considered in early marriage decisions.

For most of the interviewees, early marriage was the one and only pathway available to them as young women. Their schooling, freedom of movement, potential for independence and socialisation with males was restricted to ensure the achievement of this goal. A lack of alternatives meant that young women had no way of opposing the influence, and at times pressure, of parental expectations in the context of cultural/community expectations to marry early.

Women acknowledged that breaking off engagements, not proceeding with or not being married at a young age risked social humiliation not only for them but also for their entire family. This reality weighed heavily on most young women and affected their decision-making and their mental health.

There was consensus among interviewees that early marriage was detrimental to their physical and emotional wellbeing and to their educational and employment aspirations. Early marriage resulted in entrenching restrictions to women's development and independence. It also resulted in sex at an early age, which was physically and psychologically harmful and resulted in subsequent mental health issues. Women further recognised that childbirth and childrearing at an early age were detrimental to their body and health. The emotional anguish and long-term impacts of being coerced and sometimes forced into early marriage were also evident in women who had managed to avoid forced marriage.

Additional factors that curtailed women's aspirations included racism, lack of support from schooling environments, interruption to study due to war/conflict and migration, and family and caring responsibilities. A consistent feature in the lives of all interviewees was the lack of support available to young women who were clearly in need of this. All interviewees expressed they had wished for support and protection but in no case was this help present, either from a family member, a school staff member or a community welfare service. Indeed, all interviewees perceived their experience as solitary and against overwhelming forces.

The majority of interviewees expressed staunch opposition to early marriage and would not encourage their own daughters to pursue this option.

There were a number of factors that impacted young women's ability to make an informed decision to marry early. Women were not given information about alternative pathways and there were no role models of independent women in the community nor indeed any family or community voice against early marriage. As young women, interviewees lacked the necessary skills, experience and independence to make decisions and they had little experience of relationships and men. They agreed without fully understanding what they were agreeing to, often only realising what they had committed to when there was no option of backing out.

Sometimes early marriage was seen as a solution to difficulties within the family. Some women perceived early marriage as an opportunity to escape restrictions and difficulties in their own families. Some mothers, after

becoming sole parents, saw early marriage as a way to ease the burden of having a family and to protect and maintain their family's standing in the community.

Those women who did resist marrying early often did so with considerable consequences. Within their own families they experienced isolation and conflict whilst also exposing their families to embarrassment and gossip within the community.

Women viewed education as a critical means to developing independence and a pathway to alternative life options and decision-making. Many women reported returning to education and completing their studies after marrying early. They saw education as a way of exercising self-determination and fulfilling a dream they had as youth.

Women acknowledged that they had witnessed growing change within their communities since they had married with an increasing number of professional Muslim women now visible in the community.

Finally, it is worth noting that, with the exception of one interviewee whose parents eventually assisted her to secure a divorce because of severe family violence, none of the families appeared to be aware of the potentially negative impact of early and forced marriage on their daughters. It appears that parents continued to respond to community and family pressure to marry their daughters early or to enforce a marriage when their daughters resisted the marriage or sought to withdraw.

# A community perspective: Early marriage focus groups with Muslim women

A total of eight focus groups were held to discuss early marriage in Muslim communities. Stakeholder groups included:

- young Muslim women from a range of ethnic backgrounds
- Muslim women from a range of ethnic backgrounds
- service providers working with Muslim youth.

## Interview themes

The following themes were explored in focus groups (a full list of interview questions is attached as Appendix 3):

### Young women

- Life goals
- Marriage expectations of families
- Process of decision-making within families
- Personal views around marriage and marriage decisions
- Understanding of their legal and religious rights around marriage.

### Women

- Age at marriage
- Reasons for early marriage
- Community practice around marriage
- Potential for choice and decision-making amongst girls/young women
- Perceived differences around forced and arranged marriage
- Impact of early marriage on young women.

### Service providers

- Issues being encountered around early marriage (attitudes, influences and pathways to early marriage)
- Gender and cultural differences
- Addressing early marriage
- Opportunities and pathways to support young women through the education system.

## Demographic features

### Young women

Four focus groups involving a total of 89 young women were held in school settings across Melbourne. All participants were Muslim and represented a range of ethnic backgrounds. They included a mix of Australian-born and overseas-born. Focus groups included:

- young women aged 12–14 years and 15–16 years and living in the southern region of Melbourne (two focus groups)
- young women aged 13–15 years and living in the northern region of Melbourne
- young women aged 16–18 years and living in the south-eastern region of Melbourne.

### Women

Three focus groups involving a total of 63 Muslim women were held in community settings across Melbourne. These included:

- one focus group with Pakistani women held in the north-western region of Melbourne
- one focus group with Afghan and Iranian women held in the southern region of Melbourne
- one mixed focus group with Arabic-speaking women held in the northern region of Melbourne.

### Service providers

One focus group was held in Victoria involving 14 representatives from a range of community service providers. This region of Victoria was chosen because of the significant number of young women marrying early within the area. For the purposes of protecting the community, this region and its service providers will not be identified.

## A community perspective: Young women

The following section documents the feedback from young women.

### Future goals beyond secondary schooling

Maturity levels amongst the different age groups influenced the types of responses young women gave around future aspirations. The range of future goals they expressed included:

- accessing employment/independent financial means
- post-secondary studies (only a small number of young women expressed a desire to go to university)
- travel
- having a family
- getting a driver's licence and a car
- a sports career.

Whilst young women all expressed aspirations for themselves upon completion of secondary school they also raised a number of factors that they believed could impact their plans. These included:

- marriage
- parental opinions/expectations
- financial means
- the death of a family member.

### Marriage expectations of families

Young women generally saw their families as obstacles in pursuing their future goals.

*There are things you want to do but family has expectations. They always want what they think is the best for you – they want you to get married.*

Many young women stated that their families had the expectation that they would be engaged by their late teens. Parents believed that marriage was a religious obligation. Some suggested that their future husbands and extended family would become additional obstacles to their plans.

*They expect you to get engaged at 19 years old. Boys then stand in the way of achieving goals ...'*

*'My parents want me to get married early. They want me to get married early because marriage is part of our deen (religion).'*

However, a number of young women also proposed that family expectations were changing. Parents are now more

eager to see their daughters undertake post-secondary education before marrying. They explained that in the past women had no choice and were financially dependent on their fathers or husbands but increasingly it was being recognised within their communities that women could have financial independence and the potential to contribute to the economic elevation of their own families.

*'My parents want me to get a better education. Nowadays they want girls to get more education.'*

*'For me, like, it's up to me when I get married. Back in the day they wanted their daughters to get married early, now they respect their daughters' opinion.'*

*'I feel before parents were like "Oh, get married" but now my parents are like "First make sure you're stable because anything can happen". (Women) used to rely on their husband for money but what happens when you get divorced and you end up with nothing?'*

*'I think parents who got married earlier, they don't want their children to. They want them to fulfil their dreams.'*

A number of girls proposed that parental expectations around further study were equally as burdensome as those around early marriage.

*'Your parents think of a specific job for you and you have to meet this impossible expectation like being a doctor or something. All the things they couldn't do.'*

### Process of decision-making within families

Young women were asked when families expected them to marry and responses suggested little variation between cultural backgrounds. The most common response was around eighteen years of age.

*We are expected to marry between 18 and 19 years old. We are told we are too old to have a baby after 30 years so they start arranging marriage at 18.*

Some young women suggested that families start looking for potential husbands when their daughters are young because of the belief that a Muslim completes half their 'deen' (religion) when they marry.

*The attitude is that you are not wholly religious until you are married.*

Whilst feedback suggested that across all cultural groups marriage was arranged by parents, there were some differences in the processes families followed.

*In the Afghani culture if parents want you to be with someone you love they will let you choose. Mostly though it is just arranged. Marriages are arranged through family friends – it's someone your dad knows.*

Across all cultural groups, feedback suggested that as soon as there was interaction between a young woman and a man, planning towards marriage progresses quickly.

For young women, there was a clear difference between arranged and forced marriage and forced marriages were considered rare by focus group participants. Arranged marriages were more common and the majority of young women had the option to say no.

*'When it's arranged your parents introduce you but you can say no. They ask you, it's your choice.'*

*'Parents arrange marriage because they know you best. If you say no they will be disappointed but they won't force you. They are disappointed because they see a benefit the girl doesn't.'*

*'Some parents might force a girl but it is not very common here because girls are educated and responsible.'*

*'They want what is best for their daughter; they want their daughters to be happy, so they don't want to force her.'*

*'Girls who are forced to get married, there's a high chance of getting divorced.'*

Although young women generally agreed that forced marriage was uncommon, they did suggest that parents tried to persuade their daughters if they rejected a marriage proposal.

*'Sometimes the girl will not want to disappoint her parents. So she will just go with their choice.'*

*'Sometimes if the girl doesn't like the guy, they'll try really hard to persuade her. They'll be like "His parents are really nice, and if you reject their son they'll be so sad".'*

In all focus groups, young women agreed that marriage proposals were mostly instigated by the male's family and young women were usually selected and pursued by his parents.

*'It's usually not the boy who says "I want to marry that girl". It's usually the parents who decide for both. Everyone says the girl is getting forced; maybe the guy is too. He might have someone in mind, but his parents might not like them. The family has decided among themselves which girl he will marry.'*

*'Mostly the mum chooses for the boys because the boys might not know enough and the mothers know what kind of girl suits them.'*

However, an increasing number of young women appear to be approaching their parents with their own choices.

*In my family it happens a lot for a girl to find her own husband. My cousin got married last year. She was in the university and she found a guy she liked. She went and told her parents who spoke to his parents and they got married.*

## Personal views around marriage and marriage decisions

When asked what they personally considered a suitable age to marry, most young women suggested between the ages of 20 and 22 years. A smaller number suggested late 20s and 30s. Additional responses included:

*'When a young woman is mentally and emotionally ready.'*

*'Never.'*

*'When a young woman has a job and is financially ready.'*

*'When there is no interference.'*

*'After completing your education.'*

*'When you meet the right person.'*

The most common things young women wanted in relation to marriage were to make their own choices and to be allowed enough time and privacy to come to know their future husband before marrying. Many young women also believed that through marriage they would gain greater independence than they experienced in their parents' home.

Young women were also invited to share their views in relation to how marriage decisions are made. In summary:

- Around 50% were happy with the process of decision-making.
- Around 50% were not happy with the process of decision-making and wanted the choice to find their own partners.
- Some wanted to experience having a boyfriend before marrying.
- Some wanted the choice to marry someone from a different ethnic group.
- Some considered that girls are given choices equal to those enjoyed by boys.

Examples of responses included:

*'Sometimes your parents push you and you are not ready so you run away. A 16-year-old ran away recently in our community. Girls will also run away with a guy their parents don't approve of.'*

*'Education is the first thing for our parents. Having fun is the first thing for us.'*

*'To marry someone you don't like is the worst thing ever.'*

*'The boy gets to choose who he wants but the girl can't. The boy is placed higher than the girl.'*

*'We shouldn't judge girls who marry early. If they're happy that's fine because it's sunna (Islamic tradition) to get married early.'*

### **Understanding of religious and legal rights around marriage**

When asked to share their understanding of Islam around marriage, young women were clearly not aware of their rights as a young person nor of their rights in relation to marriage. Many stated that they believed Islam dictates:

- Your parents have to choose your husband
- You are not allowed to date
- You are not allowed to marry a non-Muslim
- You are not allowed to marry if you are under 18 years
- You have to respect your parents.

*'There are no rights for women in Islam. It depends on parents. Parents have greater influence and impact than religion. Understanding of Islam is based on what parents tell us.'*

*'It's your right to say no.'*

*'I want to pick my own husband but Islam says I can't.'*

In terms of legal rights, none of the young women involved in the focus groups were aware of their legal rights. The most common response was that young women have no rights, as ultimately their parents have full decision-making authority over marriage.

Surprisingly, young women made a number of comments in support of early marriage that reflected traditional notions within their communities.

*'Sometimes if the girl doesn't meet a boy then she needs to have an arranged marriage or she is going to end up alone.'*

*'Sometimes it's better to get married young. When you get older, it's a bit harder to get married. And when you're older and have kids you're not going to be alive when the kids are grown up.'*

*'Sometimes there are girls, they just don't like studying and they don't know what to do, so they get married.'*

However, there were also comments made around the risks of early marriage and a lack of understanding of how it will impact their lives.

*'When girls are planning marriage at a young age, they have fantasies about what's going to happen. When they get married it gets difficult for them. They have all these rules when they get married. They had dreams of travel but instead they're cooking.'*

*'Sometimes girls get married young and the guys know girls don't know anything and they can do whatever and take advantage of her.'*

*'Girls are also controlled by fear.'*



## A community perspective: Women

*'No one understands us — we have no voice as women.'*

The following section documents the feedback received from the Muslim women's focus groups.

### Age at marriage

Most focus group participants explained that the common marriage age was between eighteen and early twenties for young women. Where young women pursued post-secondary education it was becoming more common to marry in their mid-twenties once they had finished their studies. However, in some communities women explained that families were increasingly attempting to marry daughters earlier as it was becoming difficult to find suitable husbands for them as they got older.

*'Now people are becoming more convinced to get married early as possible in Australia at 18 years. Those that thought their daughters would get married older in their mid-twenties, they are not finding a good match and if they get to early thirties no one will marry them.'*

*'Islamically the best age is 18 to 22.'*

*'Mostly girls are marrying at 22 and boys at 25 years but completing education is very important.'*

Whilst most women who attended focus groups had early marriages, the majority believed that eighteen was too young to marry and preferred that their daughters finished their studies before marriage.

*'One family in my community married their daughter at 18 years as soon as she started university ...'*

*'One family married their daughter off before she finished her medicine degree and now they regret it. She didn't finish her degree because of the marriage.'*

*'In Australia parents are willing to support a daughter who wants to continue studies. They will even look after her children so she can study but it depends on the in-laws as well.'*

A number of women suggested that there has been a cultural shift and men are now seeking educated women who can financially contribute to a marriage.

*'Now boys even demand that girls are educated and can provide also. They are becoming more aware of need for education.'*

Whilst underage marriages involving girls as young as 14 took place in the past, women in the focus groups believed that these were now very rare as was any marriage involving girls under the age of eighteen years.

Parents were continuing to raise the topic of marriage prior to their daughters completing their schooling in an effort to prepare them and to get a sense of the type of husband they might prefer. With an increasing number of Muslim females taking up post-secondary studies there is a growing concern that they will wait too long and have fewer marriage proposals available to them as they get older.

*'Early marriage is very much influenced by opportunities and there are less opportunities for good proposals if you are older.'*

*'Marriage is compulsory in our culture. You can't live without it.'*

*'There are examples of young girls getting marriage proposals at school so parents want to find a good proposal early.'*

The trend towards early marriage is also growing because of perceived risks within the Australian context.

*'Because of social media parents are getting scared about negative influences and so want to marry daughters off as soon as possible.'*

*'Parents see big risks in university or having a job because there is more exposure for girls.'*

### Reasons for early marriage

Reasons for early marriage included:

- concern about the moral safety and reputation of girls
- difficulty in finding a husband once young women reached their early twenties
- the potential consequences of young women having too much freedom in Australia
- perceptions that if a girl finds a boyfriend it is not acceptable to the community and harms the reputation of the whole family
- fear around loss of culture and young women leaving the Muslim community
- interpretation of religion i.e. interaction between girls and boys alone is considered harmful and should not be encouraged
- perception that Islam requires a girl to marry as soon as she reaches physical maturity.

However, women also acknowledged that they did not want their daughters to marry early because of their own personal experiences. Some women attending focus groups had been married as young as 14 years of age.

*'Lots of bad things happen to girls in marriage. They have no idea about sex and no one warns them ...'*

*'We have a very good culture and religion but people misuse it, especially men.'*

### Community practice around marriage

Community practice around marriage differed between cultural groups but was consistent in the prominent role parents continued to play in decision-making. Over 90 per cent of women involved in focus groups had been married without their opinions being taken into consideration.

*'In the past, parents decided but increasingly parents are asking girls' opinion as well. When one woman was getting married her uncle came and asked her because her father had passed away. She was allowed to give her permission.'*

*'Parents will also marry off a girl if they think she is a burden.'*

*'The least choice is given to the individual woman and her future is reliant on the decisions of others. But it's slowly changing. Girls are being given more options and opportunities and change is happening, but slowly.'*

In contrast to the understanding of young women, the groups of mature women highlighted that Islam actually supported the right of women to have a say in their marriage decisions.

*'Parents need to learn what religion says about marriage — they only understand what is important to them.'*

*'It is always good to follow Islamic rule because they are perfect for people. If we all followed religious rules there would be no issues. The Islamic religion says both girls and boys should be asked and if either say no marriage should not go ahead.'*

*'There have been situations where girls have refused a marriage offer because they wanted to study and parents have accepted this but it has often required intervention of services or women community leaders.'*

The focus groups highlighted that there remain many abusive relationships in the community that began through arranged marriages.

*'One woman got married at 15 and she didn't want the husband but had no choice. She has been with him for 25 years and is still suffering.'*

*'One woman's parents had her engaged at 15 years old. She was forced to be married. She cries every night, has never enjoyed life and has aged quickly. She is being abused daily.'*

*'Women have had very bad experiences and want their daughters to have more choice so they don't go through the same thing but lots are still being married off early.'*

*'There is lots of violence. Men are always dominant.'*

### Potential for choice and decision making amongst girls/young women

Women spoke openly about the pressures applied to girls who reject marriage proposals and explained that in many cases even when the mother was supportive of the daughter, she had no power. Examples of pressure included:

- threats to disown daughters (this was the most common threat)
- threats to throw daughters out of home knowing they have nowhere to go
- physical violence – it is not unusual for girls to be hit
- making life impossible with household duties
- convincing girls to focus on 'exciting' aspects of the wedding and being married.

Most women did not want their daughters to feel pressured and wanted them to study instead of marrying young. However, great pressure was often applied on mothers to sacrifice the interests of their daughters for the benefit of bringing an extended family member to Australia. This also appeared to be working in reverse, that is, for young women living overseas to accept marriages in Australia for the benefit of their family.

*'Parents will sacrifice one child to save others because they are so desperate. They are very poor and hungry. It's a big issue in the community.'*

Focus group participants offered the following responses when asked what would happen if a young woman continued to resist marriage:

- young women usually give in but are unhappy in married life or end up divorcing
- young women sometimes end up convincing the man not to marry them so he breaks off the engagement

- parents will use a range of ways to get them to comply with marriage arrangements – these include using religion, explaining that they owe the family a favour or any other means that instil obligation.

Women also explained that families were increasingly recognising that marriages involving Australian-raised girls with men from overseas were not working out, whereas those that involved Australian-raised men with overseas born wives had lower divorce rates.

*(Marriages with) boys being brought out to marry are not working. Although both are from good families they have been raised differently and don't understand each other. But if an Australian-born boy marries an overseas-born girl marriages tend to last longer. There are also examples of individuals coming out as husbands and then leaving their wives as soon as they get their citizenship.*

Family violence also featured heavily in discussions around overseas-born spouses.

*'There was one girl brought out and treated very badly. She was always bruised. The whole family was mistreating her and it only got picked up in her workplace and they helped her to go back home.'*

*'Most women don't know their rights and so are abused by their in-laws. Girls have no option but to go back to their family and it is very hard to get married again. Divorced women in our culture are seen as bad women – it is still a major issue for women, especially if they have married overseas.'*

## Perceived differences around forced and arranged marriage

*'When you force someone to get married it is like killing them.'*

All women involved in focus groups saw a clear distinction between an arranged and forced marriage. They explained that arranged marriages included the following features, which were not evident in forced marriage:

- the opportunity for young women to spend time with their prospective husband to get to know him
- the willingness and consent of the young woman.

Whilst women supported arranged marriages across all groups, there was no support for forced marriage. Women referred to a number of examples of forced marriage in their communities and acknowledged that it remained an issue.

## Impact of early marriage on young women

Women were clearly aware of the impacts of early marriage on young women. Common impacts identified across focus groups included:

- that young women did not get an opportunity to enjoy their lives
- increased rates of divorce, commonly accompanied by family rejection
- increased rates of emotional and physical abuse
- girls don't know where to go or how to get help if they have problems
- health issues.

## Service providers' perspective

The service provider focus group involved a range of individuals who worked directly with either Muslim young people or their families.

### Prevalence of early marriage

The focus group explored the extent to which service providers had identified early marriage issues within local Muslim communities. Service providers offered the following feedback:

- living in a small community increases pressure on families to arrange early marriages to protect the reputations of daughters
- once girls are over 18 they are seen to be at marriageable age and so the pressure is considerable.

*In the last three years it has come up a few times. We have had six females and one male who have been 'persuaded' or subtly influenced. There have only been two that have talked about it being forced marriage.*

Service providers believed that early marriages were occurring as a result of assumed cultural practice and expectation. Their experience was that young people did not really question it and accepted it if they were eighteen or over.

*'More young women are disagreeing and talking about it with strong resistance. I have come across one young girl who disclosed that her family wanted her to marry someone overseas who is much older.'*

*'Young people will cite girls being married at 14 or 15 and they find that unacceptable. But they are more likely to accept it if they are over 18 as an expectation that is part of their family obligations. They seem more comfortable with family expectations.'*

Experiences in working with the community suggested that newly-arrived families experience culture shock and so to avoid exposure that has potential to shame the family they prefer their daughters to marry at an earlier age.

*Some parents try to keep their children reconnected with their culture and so the key way is to suggest someone to marry back home.*

Recently-arrived boys were also exposed to early marriage, as they were often the 'head' of the family. Many newly-arrived refugee-background communities are characterised by single-parent households as the father has been killed in pre-arrival conflict.

*Boys are in the situation where they are feeling a lot of pressure around being the oldest male in the house and so are expected to step up if there isn't a father model. It is very challenging for them.*

Australian-born Muslim boys were also pressured into marriage.

Service providers suggested Muslim youth were interacting with young people from 'mainstream' cultures and wanted or desired that way of life, which resulted in confusion and cultural conflict.

*In a torture and trauma setting, the feedback we are getting is that they really don't want to marry but the importance of family and family pride and the value of keeping the cultural ties is so important and more important than personal happiness. Most feel responsible for their mother's happiness and wellbeing. They fear that their mother will get sick and so they are not prepared to have that happen. They would rather sacrifice themselves. Their mothers are not willing to consider options other than a Muslim marriage for their children. They are not prepared to consider how it would impact on this young person's life.*

### Case study

One teacher spoke about a case where one particular family had a large number of children go through the school. The oldest male child was sent back overseas to be married while he was still in school. He was not happy with his wife and his whole demeanour changed. School staff had concerns about his wellbeing. A sister was also recently sent overseas to marry. She was unhappy about going as she wanted to finish her schooling.

School welfare officers, in particular, were seeing regular examples of early marriage being arranged without the consent or willingness of young women.

*'We have had girls at the school who have expressed they don't want to go overseas and the family has told them they do not have to go but end up booking the trip and in three weeks the girls are gone.'*

*'In some cases you get the impression that the engagement was in place well before the girls are asked and if they say no then the implications are grave, including retribution on the family overseas.'*

*'Although it's not that they are being forced, they are so backed into a corner that they don't feel that they have any option.'*

## Parental attitudes towards early marriage

Service providers suggested that whilst in some cases parents recognised they were not acting in the best interests of their children, the pressure within their communities and perceived risks to their children's connection with culture and family, outweighed the individual happiness of their children. The following case studies demonstrate the range of attitudes reflected by parents.

### Case study

The service provider was working with a family. The parent explained that there was too much gossip in the extended family and they were sending the daughter overseas to protect her. They were planning to tell family overseas not to allow the daughter to return. The service provider explained the potential risks of marrying a daughter off overseas including the risk of an abusive relationship. The parent changed their mind and this was a rare outcome according to the worker.

### Case study

*The dilemma for us is the focus on the young person and we have to maintain trust and confidentiality and they are begging us not to tell their parent. Depending on their age we have to respect that.*

The teacher was working with a young woman. The father insisted that the length of her school dress be down to her ankles. The teacher tried to undertake some advocacy work with the family but they explained that she would be withdrawn from school if she could not wear the uniform as they required. The girl was in the early stages of secondary schooling. Although the teacher explained it was illegal to pull the girl out of school, the parents would not budge. They would not allow her reputation to be tarnished by the length of her dress.

*When you ask the young people if they can have a dialogue with their families, sometimes the girls have not felt that they could even start the dialogue. It's a huge imbalance of power. They don't even feel that they have a right to talk with their parents.*

## Marriage pathways

Service providers explained that there are a large number of Muslim families who have settled in the region under the Women at Risk program. They usually see these

families accessing services to find out what they need to do to be able to travel overseas. Workers will ask more detailed questions where the information is being sought by a young person. They have found that most young people are unaware of Australian laws around marriage, particularly age of consent and that it is not possible to sponsor someone under the age of eighteen. Workers noticed young people are 'shocked' by this information, which appears to act as a disincentive. Sometimes, however, young people experienced this as information overload and so a range of approaches were required to introduce them to Australian laws and healthy relationships information.

*They need information and counselling before they make that decision and the whole family may need to be involved so that they understand because they all seem to be working together. This can include the pooling of money for the \$6800 needed for an application. There is no way that young people themselves have the money and so it usually involves a number of family members.*

Service providers have found that the greater the opportunity they have to work with young people the better informed they are about the implications of travelling overseas to marry. However, it causes distress when families are forcing marriage on young people or placing expectations on them to proceed.

*We give them information and counselling before they travel and make sure they understand that there are consequences that they have to think about.*

Greater efforts to provide information about the responsibilities related to sponsorship were also raised by services. They were concerned that many young people remain unaware or give little thought to the long-term consequences of sponsoring a partner to Australia. There is no understanding that when they place an application with the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, the Department will closely examine whether there exists a genuine relationship or whether there is coercion involved.

There are numerous examples of young people still in school or undertaking training who will bring a partner into a Settlement Grants Program service seeking special benefits. Once the partners arrive in Australia it becomes clear that these young people cannot support them and their families do not have enough money to help them.

*These are consequences we try to canvass with them before they go overseas to marry. Many applications are being made for*



*special benefit and this will come back to bite them and may end up as debt to the Commonwealth.*

Service providers were alarmed at the number of young people who remained unaware of the level of scrutiny involved in securing visas for partners. Many are parting with over \$6000 required to make the application and if it does not succeed, they lose that money.

*They don't believe what you are saying but you feel that you have to caution them from an immigration perspective around how the system works.*

### Factors influencing consent to marriage

Service providers had noticed that young Muslim women with low self-esteem were particularly vulnerable to early marriage.

*If the girl has low self-esteem issues around her appearance and her family have arranged a marriage, she believes she won't get anyone else and so she believes it's the only option available.*

*There is a lot of self-doubt that is influenced by the way girls are treated by their families.*

Young women were given no opportunity to learn about the intimate aspects of marriage before they decide on a marriage proposal. Workers have learnt that mothers will only discuss birth control once the commitment to marriage has been made. There is, however, no discussion on sexual relations or rights in relation to consent.

*Rape is not used but you wonder if she knows anything about what is going on around the sexual act so it is important to talk about this.*

The experience of workers was that most girls wanted to finish their education before marrying but they also continued to see girls who were not academically inclined and had no interest in entering the workforce. These young women perceive marriage as their only option.

*Some girls are focused on law or medicine and have no plan B. If they don't get in then they might lapse into marriage instead of considering alternative education.*

### Gender differences

Generally, service providers found that early marriage was not an issue confronting young men in the community. Families placed a greater focus on ensuring males did well in school and went on to further education. They were willing to support a male child to access a well-paying job before arranging a marriage.

*For some of these young men, marriage isn't even on the radar.*

The stark gender inequality experienced by young women was evident in the case examples workers shared.

### Case study

A male case manager in one program collected a young girl from the classroom to assist with a service she required. As he walked down the corridor he turned to check that she was following him. He witnessed a heated discussion between the girl and a boy from the same community who was not related to her. The boy was chastising the girl for walking alone with the case manager and insisting that she should have sought a related male to escort her. The case manager was a respected professional who was well known to students. In the debriefing that followed the incident staff recognised that the boy felt a significant burden of responsibility to adhere to cultural rules of conduct and perceived that he had done the right thing.

Young women were increasingly gaining the confidence to raise issues with trusted teachers and service providers but only on the proviso that this would not get back to their parents.

*I asked her what her family would say if they knew we were having the conversation and she went into meltdown. She said they would lock her up and she started getting anxious that I might say something. She begged me not to say anything as she would be seen to be betraying the family.*

### Case study

One service established a cultural diversity drop-in program one night per week. Initially both young men and young women were attending. Two of the young people in attendance commenced dating and would leave the premises to be alone. This came to the community's attention and young women were no longer allowed to access the drop-in program. Young women did not return for 12 months until a female only drop-in night was established.

*Because of that one incident, the families now think it is too Western and so we have had to rebuild the relationship. It is only because of the trusted staff that girls can now attend.*

### Enhancing awareness of options

A key area where service providers have been making diligent efforts involves working with young women to increase their knowledge of options available to them post schooling. From the outset of their arrival in Australia,



settlement programs include an assessment of young women's interests and skills and provide information about pathways where than can continue to pursue these.

*I don't think that they can even see options for themselves. Now that they are safe the next step is to marry. A lot of them will see that it is their only purpose.*

Career counselling programs are planned to enable staff to learn about young women's ambitions so that these can be aligned with areas of study. Staff see that many girls are inspired and want to undertake further studies once they are provided with the information.

*We try to encourage them based on the information they give us. There is a lot of discussion from them – it is not just us sowing the seed.*

However, there were also examples of parents intervening to prevent girls from pursuing careers they were interested in.

*'We had a girl who wanted to do nursing. Her family realised that part of the nursing was to touch men and so they pulled her out of the course. There are lots of cases like this.'*

*'The girls from this school have huge aspirations and they are on the path academically and they are working their guts out to get good scores.'*

## Cultural differences

Whilst service providers did not see many differences based on ethnicity, they were seeing particular issues based on arrival categories and pathways.

Families arriving under the Women at Risk visa experienced a greater level of anxiety about maintaining family values due to the absence of a male adult in the family. Female-headed households were trying hard to sustain family values and carried the burden of responsibilities alone.

*From our perspective, the families overseas put pressure on these women to carry on with traditions. They have to do what the family says and feel they have no other option. This includes marriage decisions made for their daughters by family overseas.*

Service providers have not been able to access any local community leaders who are willing to intervene in these cases.

*There are also overseas dynamics and they shift and so you have to be really careful about how you might approach community leaders. For example, we get someone saying I am the leader of the community and you only contact me. They are gatekeepers*

*and we only hear a small amount of information about the community.*

## Suggestions for addressing early marriage

Service providers made the following suggestions for addressing early marriage:

- A positive capacity-building approach rather than punitive action where early marriage is identified

*'There doesn't seem to be an easy way out for the young person. Calling the federal police? That's hardly an option. Where do you refer them? Child protection and police are both punitive. They are not great alternatives. You are literally saying to them you need to risk your family ostracising you and not being part of the family. To say that to a young woman, they just wouldn't want that.'*

- Parenting programs in partnership with specialist services to ensure engagement

*'One of the things that we are doing with the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights is around parenting groups with the mothers of the kids at the school. It's less threatening and more about parenting generally but that topic is introduced and the message gets across.'*

- Leadership development programs for young women that integrate information on relevant topics
- Professional development to support workers to work with the community – many are feeling out of their depth

*'We are intimidated by the vast differences in family values. We are scared that we are imposing family values that will be looked upon disdainfully and we are not sure we have the right to do this.'*

*'We need more education on why it means so much for these families, how it creates wealth and security. We need a deeper understanding of their values to make sure we don't impose our family values on their culture. We aren't doing that great either.'*

*'It is such a new and complex phenomena that we are all as professionals just hoping that we are dealing with it right. We are treading on an unknown path.'*

- Developing a network of Muslim women role models that young women can be exposed to
- Working with mothers and girls using strengths-based approaches

*'I think it would be wonderful to involve mum in a way that she doesn't feel she is being punished. We need a specialised family support worker that can identify these issues. Child protection often comes in and creates horrific turmoil and so mum ends up shutting down.'*

*'The poor girl is shamed by everybody and she doesn't have the power to say she doesn't feel safe, and then she has to meet federal police. This is re-traumatising because she has probably had negative experiences with police in her previous country.'*

- Establishing specialist roles in child protection agencies who understand intersecting cultural factors
- Working within cultural and religious frameworks and understanding of family
- Imparting information about the law in empowering ways so it does not come across as punitive or as a threat to culture.

## Summary

This section of the report looked at early marriage from three perspectives: young women, women from the community and service providers. The summary below considers findings from the different perspective on marrying young offered by each group.

Young women shared that there were expectations from their family to marry from the age of eighteen onwards and that this was supported by community and cultural expectations as well as religious obligations. These expectations, according to young women, were slowly easing in two specific ways. One was that post-secondary education before marriage was becoming increasingly important within their families and communities; the other that young women were being consulted by parents in the decision-making process around marriage. Whilst early marriage expectations may have eased, feedback from young women suggested that expectations to marry continue to frame and impact educational and vocational goals and the independence of young women.

Discussions with young women also suggested that the marriage process is not driven by them but by their parents, or the man's family. About half the young women interviewed were happy with the current decision-making process where their parents were involved and influential while the other half wanted to have the choice to find their own partners.

Focus group participants believed that young women in their community generally had the option to say no to unwanted matches, but they also stated that there was

little space for young women to make their own decisions as marriage planning progressed quickly once a proposal was accepted. Most young women in the focus groups believed they were free to make a choice about who and when they marry. Nonetheless, family and community expectations featured significantly in how they thought about the decision to marry and influenced their personal aspirations.

The young women believed that Islam conferred no rights on young women, both in relation to rights bestowed by their families and in relation to marriage. There appeared to be some awareness among participants that their understanding of Islam was entirely dependent on their parents and, as such, that understanding may not be an accurate representation of Islam's true stance on marriage. Young women were also overwhelmingly unaware of any legal rights and protections they had under Australian law. This lack of awareness around individual rights and protections, both legal and non-legal, suggests that a lack of access to information and possible alternatives to early marriage may have framed young women's responses to the focus group questions.

Women from the community agreed with young women that there was change occurring in relation to attitudes and beliefs about early marriage. They noted that men were increasingly seeking to marry educated women who could contribute financially and that it was becoming more common for young women to pursue post-secondary education and to marry after having completed their studies.

However, focus group discussions also suggested that there is continued pressure to marry early to avoid the perceived risks of missing out on marriage because women are beyond the accepted norm for marriageable age or because they may not be able to find an equally educated husband. There were also fears about the negative influences of the university environment on young women's perceived moral and social standing in the community, as well as the fear that young women might leave their community or abandon their cultural/religious mores as a result of influences they were exposed to in university settings.

Women stated that parents continued to play a prominent role in the early marriage decision-making process regardless of whether a young woman had completed post-secondary education. The majority of women in the focus groups explained that they had not had their opinion taken into account when decisions were being made in relation to their own marriages. Increasingly, however, just as young women were being asked their opinion, mothers themselves were also becoming more

vocal and committed to having a greater say in the marriage decision-making process for their daughters.

Women understood that Islam supported the right of women to have a say in marriage decisions, which contrasts with the view of young women that Islam conferred no rights on women in relation to marriage decisions. They were also aware of the repercussions involved in young women refusing a marriage proposal. A number of women stated that where this had occurred within their communities, it had often involved the intervention of services or women community leaders. These focus group findings offer a key learning for this research; that is, that young women alone are unlikely to have the capacity to oppose the pressures of their parents and expectations of their community. They highlight that young women may not have sufficient supports within their family, among their peers or at school to resist an unwanted marriage.

Women understood that young women often had no power even when their mother was supportive when it came to rejecting marriage proposals. They shared that young women were threatened in various ways to accept a marriage proposal and that there were significant pressures placed on them around the consequences for rejecting proposals.

Service providers stated that early marriage was occurring as a result of cultural practice and expectations. They saw young women as not really questioning the practice and generally accepting their family's decisions if they were 18 years or older. This concurs with the focus groups held with young women.

The understanding of service providers was that for newly-arrived communities, marrying early was connected to trying to preserve cultural identity and contend with the perceived differences between their cultural and settlement environment. Additionally – and perhaps a burden felt more keenly by women who have arrived in Australia from a war zone as sole parents – there was also a palpable desire to keep the family intact and connected

to family members overseas. In this context, even when young women did not want to marry, cultural and familial ties were viewed as more important than personal happiness.

Service providers were able to provide numerous case examples where there was an imbalance of power in the decision-making process for early marriage. Even where young women did not want to consent to marriage, they were reluctant to question their family's decision or talk about what was happening to professionals without feeling they had betrayed their family.

Service providers noted that young women were unaware of their legal rights around marriage and unaware of the potential consequences of marriage decisions on their lives and futures. Factors that contributed to making young women more vulnerable to early marriage included poor self-esteem, and a lack of opportunity to learn about the intimate aspects of marriage before deciding on a marriage proposal. Even after deciding to marry, young women were not provided with crucial information in relation to sexual and reproductive health, including rights in relation to consent in sexual relations.

While some young women did not see alternative options to early marriage, they did respond positively when provided with information and support by services. Service providers believe that eradicating early and forced marriage is not just about engaging with young women but must also involve engaging the community and family, because it is essentially these systems and influences that generate the pressure and expectations on young women to marry young.

Young women appeared unaware of the barriers to practising informed consent in early marriage decision-making. This was different from women from the community who were aware of these barriers while simultaneously accepting marriage is a high priority for young women. Service provider views were again different in that they suggested there were significant barriers to informed consent to early marriage decision-making.

# Young women's experiences: Early marriage questionnaires

## Introduction

A questionnaire (see Appendix 4) on young women's experiences around early marriage was distributed to young Muslim women through the AMWCHR's secondary school network. Copies of the questionnaire were forwarded to program workers in schools to distribute to young women for completion. Additionally, the AMWCHR's young women's program staff administered the questionnaires in facilitated discussions with groups of young women. Staff explained the AMWCHR's work and the aims of the project before walking young women through the questionnaire. We found this to be the most successful method of collecting completed questionnaires.

In total, 53 questionnaires were completed by young women.

Although questionnaires and surveys are increasingly being used within the community sector for data gathering purposes, it is important to note that the AMWCHR experienced considerable difficulty utilising this data collection method and the project was held up significantly to ensure this aspect of the research was completed. There are essential questions to be examined as to whether questionnaires are culturally or age-appropriate in undertaking this work, and there are further questions still as to whether this method of data collection is appropriate to the research topic.

In the administration of the questionnaires, AMWCHR staff noted considerable circumspection and apprehension about the identification of early and forced marriage as a topic of concern. Many young women expressed reluctance to provide comment on the issue and those who completed questionnaires independently offered little feedback. A considerable number of young women we sought to engage with expressed the view that early and forced marriage was not a problem within the Muslim community and that it did not deserve the significant service focus it was receiving. This feedback contradicted the findings from the focus groups; hence the concern with using questionnaires as a data collection process for a highly sensitive topic.

## Questionnaire findings

### Participant demographics

The age of questionnaire participants ranged from 15 to 18 years. Nearly half the questionnaire participants were born in Australia, one third came to Australia from overseas to join family and six participants arrived in Australia as refugees. Participants identified from a range of cultural backgrounds including Afghan, Lebanese, Iranian, Iraqi, Egyptian, Albanian and Somali.

### Goals for the future

Of the 53 questionnaire respondents, a significant majority identified education and vocation as future goals. Thirty-one respondents identified study and achieving educational goals as their ambitions for the future. Twenty-one young women identified vocation as a primary goal for the future with many nominating a specific vocation such as psychologist, nurse, school teacher, doctor and lawyer while seven identified marriage and parenting as goals. Other replies included becoming

successful, travelling, becoming wealthy, helping others and one participant identified living a life influenced by Islamic values.

### Level of education

When asked what level of education the young women wished to complete, forty-five respondents stated that they wanted to receive a university education. Seven respondents stated that they wanted to complete year 12 and one respondent stated that she wanted to complete year 10 and go to TAFE because she was not confident academically. A range of reasons for wanting a university education were stated and included: to have a better future; to get a better job/career; and to become successful and independent.

*'Just for myself, for my own satisfaction and to be able to say I did something in life.'*

*'Because I need to be something in the future.'*

## Work

All 53 respondents reported that they wanted the opportunity to work in the future. Fifty respondents thought they would work in the future, while two thought they would not.

## Life goals

When asked about other goals that young women had for their lives respondents identified achieving vocational aspirations, helping others and improving the world as well as travel, marriage and having a family. Two respondents identified attending the Hajj and travelling to Mecca. Only two young women indicated that they did not know what other things they would like to do with their lives.

Examples of what young women wanted to do with their lives included:

*Be happy, and become successful and overcome all my fears and imperfections.*

## Most important goal in the next few years

When questionnaire respondents were asked about their most important goal in the next few years, over half (39) responded with completing year 12 or entering and/or completing university studies. Four respondents stated securing a job or desired career. Another four respondents identified getting married and starting their own family while two others identified goals associated with religious aspirations. One respondent stated the following as her goal for the next few years:

*To never give up and always keep going no matter what obstacles try to knock me down.*

One respondent stated she didn't have a goal for the next few years.

## Parental goals for their daughters

When it came to what parents thought was the most important thing for young women to achieve, 27 respondents stated the most important thing was a good education and/or going to university while ten respondents stated it was to have a career or good job. Four respondents stated the most important thing expected by parents was to marry and have children.

Other responses included: 'to be happy with whatever I want to do'; 'achieve life goals'; 'be able to support myself'; 'to be a good Muslim and a respected woman'; and 'to be close to my parents'.

Only one respondent did not know what her parents wanted.

## Attitudes towards marriage

Forty-seven respondents answered yes to the question of whether they would like to get married. One also added that she 'had to'. Five respondents stated 'no' while one wrote 'No, not at the moment'.

One respondent offered further feedback as to why she did not want to marry yet:

*My mother married early but wants her daughter to stay in school. My older sister wants to marry if she finds someone who aligns with our values but my parents won't listen to her.*

When considering whether marriage will affect future plans, 15 respondents stated that it would, while 37 stated that it would not. One respondent stated both 'yes' and 'no'.

When asked about how marriage would affect plans for the future, the majority of respondents indicated that it would restrict those plans:

*I would be pressured to leave university.'*

*'Marriage would prevent me from travelling.'*

*'It will not allow me to do things I want to. The experience of my sisters is that they're not allowed to make their decisions alone.'*

One respondent thought marriage would help:

*It would let me travel the world with my husband.*

Another respondent felt it would make no difference:

*I don't think it can affect my plans because it's my decision who I want to marry and I will make sure it doesn't affect my future.*

## Age of marriage

A significant portion (44) of respondents selected 25 years and under as their likely age to marry. Of the 44, 31 selected the ages of 22 to 25 while 13 selected the ages of 19 to 21. Only four respondents selected 25 years of age and above as their likely age to marry. One respondent selected 18.

If the decision was left wholly to the young woman then there was little difference in the results. A clear majority chose 25 and under. Of these respondents, 33 selected 22 to 25, 10 selected 19 to 21, and three selected 18. Five respondents selected 25 and above as their preferred age to marry.

## Making marriage decisions

Questionnaire respondents were asked who would be involved in making the decision to marry. Twenty-two respondents said that the decision to marry would only involve themselves. Twelve respondents chose the option where they made the decision with their parents, while 14 respondents stated that they weren't involved in the marriage decision. Five selected the mother option and three selected both the mother and father options while three selected the father option. Other selections included 'uncle', 'aunt'; one selected 'brother' and one other included 'grandmother'.

Questionnaire respondents were not only asked about who would be involved in the decision to marry but also how much say they would have in that decision. Thirty-two respondents selected the decision is made by me and my parents together, two respondents selected both it was their own decision and that their parents would have a say, while one selected 'mostly me, but my parents' opinions matter'; another stated 'more my parents than me' and another 'the decision is made by me and my brothers'. Sixteen respondents stated that only they would have a say in the decision to marry.

## Making the marriage decision

Eleven respondents believed their parents were best informed to make marriage decisions:

*'Yes because parents have more experience and they make decision what is good for their child.'*

*'Yes, they have more of an insight into specific families (and) who is best for their daughter.'*

*'Yes, because your parents are more experienced and can identify a "good" person for you.'*

*'Parents know more than their kids.'*

*'Yes, as they have your best interest at heart.'*

*'I think they should because sometimes us girls can be so attracted to someone we won't know his real ways. Your parents can tell if he is treating you right and if he is the right man for you.'*

Twenty-eight respondents believed the best approach was for young women and parents to decide together:

*'I think it's a bit of both. A girl should have the choice to marry whoever they want but that person might be a bad influence.'*

*'I think it should be my choice and also my parent's choice, because that way everyone's happy.'*

*'I believe that it should be mine and my parent's decision because they my parents know what I want.'*

*'I think a woman should have a say in when and who they want to marry because it is her life and future. However, the decision should be discussed with the parents, obviously.'*

*'Everyone should be informed as a family and decision is made based on the women's happiness.'*

*'Not best informed but to have a say or an opinion would be more appropriate than making the complete decision for the girl.'*

*'Yes it should be the women's choice; however, the parents should ultimately provide their guidance.'*

*'I think young women know what they want, yet parents' opinions should be taken into consideration.'*

*'If I like someone I will first talk with my parents if they think I made a right decision, if that person is for me.'*

*'It's nice to have my parents' advice on my marriage, but it's up to me. My parents are very thoughtful and understanding of my love life.'*

*'I make the decision of who I want to marry but is my parents' decision too — my parents should tell me the right things.'*

Eleven respondents believed the best approach was for young women to make their own decisions about marriage:

*'No, because sometimes girls are forced and leave their education.'*

*'No because your parents aren't going to be living with him, you are.'*

*'The final decision should be the woman.'*

*'Young women, because parents aren't used to this generation of people and the girls would make the right decision.'*

*'Young women, because it's their life.'*

*'No, I believe when a child is ready and knows she has the right mind for marriage — it's totally up to the woman as in the future her marriage is what she will live by.'*

Two respondents stated that they did not know and one suggested her brother should be involved in decision-making.



## Marriage age in the community

Eighteen respondents stated that girls were 18 years or younger when they married in their community. This consisted of five respondents selecting 17, eleven respondents selecting 18, and two respondents selecting 16.

The other respondents selected ages above 18 and below 25. Six respondents selected 22 to 25 and twenty-two respondents selected 19 to 21 while two respondents selected 19 to 21 and 22 to 25 and another two selected 18 as well as 19 to 21.

Three respondents chose both ranges: two respondents selected 16, 17, 18, 19 to 21 and one respondent selected 17 and 22 to 25, with an arrow next to the 17 and 18 options with 'more common' written beside it.

## Reasons for early marriage

Respondents offered a variety of reasons for why young women marry before the age of eighteen in their community. A number related to family: because young women want, agree to or are forced into an arranged marriage; to escape family problems; to attain freedom and independence.

Other reasons related to the community: to reduce gossip; cultural expectations; seeing other girls in the community and wanting the same thing. Examples of how community expectations affect girls included:

*Because some families in our community think girls should get married when they start puberty; because maybe they cannot afford their expenses; or maybe they think their daughter will fall in love and run away from home. In our community they're all against love marriage.*

Meeting someone and falling in love were also offered as explanations, as well as to get away from war and to get away from problems in school or in life.

## Attitudes towards marrying before eighteen

Thirty-seven respondents believed marriage before eighteen was 'bad'. Their reasons for thinking this included: they are too inexperienced and immature for marriage; they risk their career and education and pursuing their goals; they are at the age where they should enjoy life; it will create a lot of problems in the future; and it is bad if they are forced to marry.

Eight respondents believed marriage before eighteen was a good thing if it was the girl's own choice. Reasons included:

*'It's not a bad thing because it's her choice.'*

*'Getting married before the age of 18 is totally up to the person – it's up to them if they are happy with it.'*

*'As long as they're happy.'*

*'It's good in the sense that it supports Islam's teachings.'*

*'If it is their choice then yes it is alright.'*

*'I don't mind it, but having experience is good.'*

*'It has its benefits due to being free of parents (strict family).'*

Some respondents suggested it could be a 'good' or 'bad' thing:

*'Yes and no because then they wouldn't commit anything bad and no because they are still young and naïve to understand much.'*

*'I think it's a bit of both. They are a bit young in my opinion but it also sets them up and prepares them for when they have kids.'*

*'It can be good and bad. Good if the girl is happy with the man and is getting away from a hard lifestyle at home and bad because most girls that get married young don't complete school.'*

*'It may have negative impacts and positive ones.'*

*'It depends on the situation. Good if the girl is ready and wants to. Bad if forced and not ready.'*

*'It depends on the family and the person; their life can be threatened.'*

## Additional feedback about marriage for young women in the community

The additional feedback provided by questionnaire respondents consisted of advice to young women about their decisions and rights:

*'Choose the person you want.'*

*'Don't let it be a forced marriage because it is hard to handle.'*

*'Every young woman should live according to their own free will.'*

Feedback also included general advice such as:

*'A lot of the girls marry men a bit too old for them.'*

*'Girls should get married when they are above 18.'*

*'Early marriage makes women lose their goals.'*

As well as tips on the marriage decision:

*'Marry an educated man because they have knowledge of the rules and how to respect each other.'*

*'Only marry if you feel that it's the right thing to do for the right reasons and make sure he is a man that will treat you right and care and love you.'*

*'Make sure you're 100 per cent sure and you have a say in the relationship.'*

Some feedback was not in favour of early marriage:

*'Girls shouldn't be married at a young age because a lot of responsibilities will fall on their shoulders and they aren't ready for that yet.'*

*'Don't enter an arranged marriage.'*

*'Don't get married too young: explore your dreams, reach them and have a career pathway to save your life.'*

While other feedback was more positive:

*'Make a marriage decision with parents and to listen to them as they may know best.'*

The additional feedback suggested that questionnaire respondents were aware of risks associated with early marriage and how it could have an impact on young women's futures through their educational, vocational and life goals.

In administering and collecting the final set of questionnaires, a young woman requested her opinion be documented in our research report and that it be recorded verbatim. We have respectfully included her short interview here because it reflects the complexity of young women's thinking on early marriage:

**Young woman:** I am against the new law preventing early marriage. What if the family are very poor? They need that space. Girls can run away from parents. Some parents are very closed minded. It can be a good thing for girls, eye opening. They never go out or have friends – parents are very strict.

**AMWCHR staff member:** Do you think marriage is the answer?

**Young woman:** Marriage can be a help for girls. Sometimes parents don't let them go to school but the husband will let them.

**AMWCHR staff member:** What if you marry a strict husband?

**Young woman:** It can be a risk but it depends on the girl. It doesn't serve everyone. There is always the word NO. Everything is not always yes – you can't always just say yes to the parent for their happiness. It is the rest of your life. If you feel a man is going to harm you, you can say no. In our religion you cannot be forced. If you say no the Sheikh won't do it because that goes against our religion.

**AMWCHR staff member:** But what if girls are forced to get married?

**Young woman:** Yes. I know a family that forced their girls. They came to my school and dropped out in year 10 and are now all married. Their parents were so strict and they rebelled at school. They had no voice and marriage was their freedom.

My parents are open-minded; they tell me marriage is my choice. Mum says she will allow two months before I marry to get to know my partner so our minds are matched. You should not have a law stopping early marriage. Girls should be allowed to marry young if they want to.

## Summary

Young women are determinedly focused on attaining their educational and vocational goals in the immediate and medium-term future. Few young women identified marriage as a plan or priority in their shorter-term planning. When asked specifically about when they would marry the majority of respondents expected to marry

before the age of 25 but they felt that this was unlikely to affect their future educational plans. On the whole, young women rated their vocation and educational goals as their highest priority, and felt that their parents would agree that this was important for them.

This suggests an easing of restrictions on the choices and independence of young women. As a result, there appears to be less conflict between the goal of marrying and educational and vocational aspirations.

Young women saw parents as central to the decision-making process around marriage. Only a small group stated that they would make the decision on their own. When prompted further about this, young women emphasised parents' advice, experience and guidance as important factors they would take into consideration. For some young women, however, when and whom to marry remained a choice of their parents.

Young women appeared to be aware of family and community expectations of marrying early. A majority were against early marriage as they perceived they had no life experience and also recognised the risk to their aspirations and future plans. Many of the young women were of the view that both early and forced marriages took place in their community. However, there was a sense that while it happened in the community it would not happen to them.

This may suggest that young women continue to view the nature of marriage decision-making as less about

an individual's preferences and more as a familial and community expectation within their cultural context. Family and community expectations and norms appeared to be uppermost in young women's minds.

Overall, young women seemed optimistic about their futures and their ability to combine their educational and vocational goals with the familial and community expectations of marriage before the age of 25.

In conclusion, the findings of this component of the research indicate that the community contexts within which these young women belong allow for, and possibly encourage, early marriage. In contrast, there appears to be no community norm about marrying older or remaining unmarried. Indeed, these possibilities were not raised and therefore do not appear to be offered to young women as viable alternatives. Young women's responses to the questionnaire suggest they have adapted to these expectations. However, this requires young women to exercise judgement about their lives, including how their personal goals may be achieved, before they have gained the necessary life experience and developed their understanding of marriage and relationships.

# Early marriage: Project findings and proposed strategic directions

## Conclusion

In many ways, examining early-marriage decision-making provides insight into what it means to be a young Muslim woman in Australia, and how these young women perceive themselves and the world they live in.

It is clear that young Muslim women perceive life in a manner that is unique compared to other groups of Australian young women. While their lives might unfold in ways similar to other Australian women (marriage, family, education and work) the process by which they arrive at these social locations places them significantly outside the norm. When compared to other Australian women, these young Muslim women differ in terms of the power they exercise in determining when, how and indeed if they pursue these milestones.

The vast majority of young Muslim women surveyed or who participated in focus groups had not directly experienced early and/or forced marriage or witnessed someone who had. It is not surprising then that many young women did not find the practice of early marriage necessarily problematic or a risk to their future goals and aspirations. Rather, young Muslim women appeared confident in their belief that they will exercise considerable agency over their lives. Nonetheless, this belief in self-agency exists alongside acceptance of family and community expectations; for young women, self-agency is not undermined by meeting family and community expectations.

This research does not explore the true extent to which these young women have agency over their lives. Rather, it examines the degree to which this belief features in young women's minds and how this shapes the early-marriage decision-making process.

This research identifies how young women view the pathway to marriage. They expect to be engaged from the age of eighteen years onwards and to be married by their early twenties. They accept the involvement of family in the decision-making process. Often a member of the male's family or the young woman's own family initiates the marriage proposal. Once initiated, there is usually rapid progress with the marriage.

The vast majority of young women who participated in this research project were highly likely to rate educational and vocational goals as part of their immediate future, with

few nominating marriage as an immediate goal. Marriage was not uppermost in the young Muslim women's minds when thinking of their immediate future. Yet when asked further about when they expected to be married they suggested before 25 years of age with many selecting 21 years of age, presumably with the decision-making occurring earlier.

For young Muslim women marriage is not just about their personal happiness but about love of family. The commitment to family features profoundly in young women's thinking about marriage and life aspirations. It can be said that young Muslim women seek to achieve harmony between their needs and the needs of family and community.

An important finding of this research is that young women trust the current decision-making process and accept early marriage, as they are committed to harmony between their expectations and the expectations of their family and community. Young Muslim women appear to accept the practice without fully understanding the potential implications for their self-agency, their independence and the overall direction of their lives.

How young women think about early-marriage decision-making can be contrasted with how older women from the community think about it, having experienced early and/or forced marriage. Having been married early through force clearly leads to a better understanding of the implications of early and forced marriage, in comparison to young women who may lack significant life experience. However, beyond this fundamental difference, this research project did not explore other potential differences between women who reject early marriage and those who endorse it.

Older women from the community were far more circumspect about the capacity to reject marriage proposals and the ability of young Muslim women marrying early to make informed decisions. They understood the difficult position young women faced when rejecting a marriage proposal and how little power young women held even with a supportive mother.

Service providers, older women from the community and women who were forced into early marriage all noted the lack of alternative pathways, options and supports

available to young Muslim women generally. Young women were also unaware of and therefore lacked role models; they were unaware of professional Muslim women who were independent, who may have chosen to marry later or not marry at all and who, nonetheless, continued to identify with their community.

Women also articulated how the rejection of marriage proposals led to significant implications for young women. These included family rejection, isolation, withdrawal from school, increased pressure to agree to subsequent marriage proposals, community stigma, and a range of other consequences. This highlighted the impact on young women and raised questions about their capacity to resist unwanted marriages.

The consequences of early and forced marriage, described in individual interviews and focus groups, were profound. Significant emotional turmoil and, at times, harm featured in all of the women's stories. For women living in zones subject to war and conflict, these marriages often resulted in physical harm associated with early pregnancy and family violence. Although not specifically investigated, sexual violence and servitude appear to have characterised some of the marital relationships of women who had married early. Women also implied struggles with anxiety, depression, suicidality, erosion of self-esteem and corrosion of self-identity.

This research demonstrated clearly that entry into early and forced marriage is a complex and varied experience that is unique to each woman. While some young women initially consented to the marriage, others were completely excluded from the decision-making process. Indeed, there appeared instances in which parents were coerced to marry their daughters off because of pressure from extended family.

All the interviewees who married young described being forced or experiencing duress. For some women, living in impoverished circumstances or in a conflict zone powerfully denied them the ability to reject unwanted marriages. Other young women were severely limited in their capacity to resist and make informed decisions about their future by factors such as: love of, attachment to and dependence on family; the social and emotional vulnerability inherent in being young; and their inexperience of men and relationships.

Nonetheless, while the older women in the community were far more aware of such barriers they continued to endorse the pathway of marriage as the priority for young women.

Fundamental to the practice of early and forced marriage are economic deprivation, a desire to keep families intact

and maintenance of cultural identity. These are powerful motivators, suggesting that early and forced marriage will continue to feature in the lives of young Muslim women and, in some instances, young Muslim men.

The current research highlights that decision-making around early marriage occurs within the context of socio-economic, religious, community and familial expectations and pressures that perpetuate and reinforce the early marriage pathway as the only option for young women.

Examining decision-making around early marriage highlights the critical and influential role of gendered attitudes. Like all cultures, the role of women is greatly undervalued, their contributions minimised and their achievements diminished. In all societies, marriage and procreation are considered a fundamental achievement of a woman's life – a man's life would not be measured in this way. However, in the context of young Muslim women's lives this universal tendency to diminish women's roles beyond a family context takes on added potency, as moral and religious codes of the community place additional emphasis and limits on sexual and reproductive behaviour. This not only translates to gender-segregated lives, but it additionally limits young women's vocational options and aspirations. It also severely limits their understanding of men, relationships and their power to determine the type of marriage that is in their best interest.

The profound reach of gendered attitudes and their negative impact on women is most evident in the pressure exerted on women who are sole parents to ensure their children are married early, so as to maintain their family's social inclusion within their community and extended family. It is also evident in the inescapable bind young women find themselves in when they wish to delay marriage to follow life aspirations but are also concerned by the prospect that they may be 'left on the shelf'.

Young Australian Muslim women have every right to enjoy the same freedoms and equality experienced by other women. They also have the right to self-determination and access to the strengths afforded by their religion and culture. There is a range of existing capacity-boosting resources that young Muslim women lack access to, including knowledge of their religious rights and the modelling of strong independent Muslim women who have navigated cultural/religious norms and community and family expectations to establish their own lives.

All the women who were forced into marriage early identified the practice as harmful, and stated that they would protect their daughters from the practice. This is not an insignificant community wisdom/resource that may assist young women to develop more informed

understandings of early and forced marriage. Some of these women's experiences have relevance for young women who are not being forced but may nonetheless seek early marriage. The sharing of women's experience is potentially as important a resource as Muslim women role models.

Many women identified the value of having Muslim women as alternative role models. However, interviewees expressed significant concern about the services currently available to young women and the failure of mainstream services to understand the complexity of responding to young Muslim women at risk of early marriage. Most interviewees felt that the service system did not have meaningful options available to young women, and many felt that their cultural situation was insufficiently understood. As such, most young women suggested that accessing a mainstream service for information or support would not be an option they would consider. They would, however, be responsive to role models from within their own communities who had followed non-traditional pathways.

This study has highlighted that young women desperately require tailored support and capacity-building programs. It is especially important that they receive more targeted support from schools in relation to education and employment pathways. This approach may assist with overcoming the significant isolation young Muslim women experience on the issue of early and forced marriage.

It is clear that young Muslim women make decisions and hold views of early and forced marriage through the lens of family and community values. As such, both family and community education programs need to be implemented on the impact of early and forced marriage and the rights and protections available to young women at risk. Equally, community programs that specifically target gender inequality and consider the religious, cultural and community imperatives that families and young women must navigate are crucial if the practice is to be eradicated. Currently, young Muslim women's aspirations and needs are influenced by culturally restrictive views of the role of women, the prioritising of marriage above all other pathways young women might choose, and cultural mores around sexual and reproductive rights.

This study also indicated that positive change was occurring, that while the practice of early marriage

continues to impact some young women's lives, the value of education for young women is being increasingly recognised within Muslim communities. Additionally, it was found that older women were more likely to understand that early marriage was not necessarily a cultural or religious practice, and that other women in their community were active in determining who they married.

Women who desire better futures for their daughters and recognise the opportunities that their daughters have access to within the Australian context are leading the attitudinal change that is clearly taking place within the Muslim community. There is a concern that the capacity of community members and young women to change the practice of early marriage is being hampered by the external environment. The misrepresentation of Muslims, the sensationalising of early marriage, together with the negative portrayals of Muslim communities primarily delivered through mainstream media, are clearly a cause of much concern for the community. It has hampered our own ability to complete this research project.

It is the view of the AMWCHR that hardship and anxiety generally manifest in greater conservatism and resistance to change within communities. For Australian Muslim communities, this hardship can refer to pre-migration experiences of war and trauma, and to post-migration settlement challenges such as unemployment and under-employment, poverty, and racism. For some Australian Muslims, these challenges have been significant and overwhelming, and some sections of the Muslim community have withdrawn and reverted to traditional practices in efforts to protect aspects of 'culture' and identity that they perceive to be under siege.

No cultural practice exists within a vacuum. It is not only important to understand the context that gave rise to a cultural practice and the factors that sustain it; it is also important to recognise the role of context in seeking to eradicate a particular practice. In committing to working towards the eradication of early and forced marriage and in expanding the opportunities for young women to exercise self-agency, the context of their lives and their decisions is important. Family, community and living in Australia must all be considered in the development of strategies and programs that seek to empower young women towards self-determination.



## Recommendations

The following strategic directions have emerged through this research. They prioritise a strengths-based approach that enables change that is led and determined by Muslim women and communities.

### Strategic directions

#### 1. Women's leadership program

That a women's leadership program is developed and established to engage younger and older Muslim women and enable discussions in safe spaces. This program could explore women's rights, economic independence, educational/vocational pathways, reproductive health and healthy relationships within the cultural framework of women's lives.

#### 2. Vocational advice

That a tailored educational/vocational advice program is established in schools that recognises the unique challenges young Muslim women face and the potential consequences for young women who do not have educational or vocational options. This program should target young Muslim women from year 10 onwards.

#### 3. Legal rights awareness

That legal education and legal rights awareness programs are developed for Muslim youth and delivered in safe settings that enable young people to engage and learn in an empowering way.

#### 4. Muslim women's network

That a network of successful Muslim women is established as role models for young Muslim women. This network could:

- present at school careers days
- host events that engage young women in positive settings
- mentor young Muslim women
- set up a social media network to engage and inspire young women.

#### 5. Community education

That a community education initiative be rolled out for the Muslim community on early and forced marriage, with special emphasis on both federal and state laws that potentially have an impact on the marriage of young women and men. This should include the development of audio, online and written information for the community.

A specialised training program should be developed for community and religious leaders focusing on Australian law. This education program should address migration law, and rights and protections available to young people who are sponsoring potential spouses or are being sponsored by an Australian citizen.

#### 6. Parenting programs

That parenting programs targeted to Muslim communities adopt a strengths-based approach. This program needs to engage with cultural norms that support the practice of early and forced marriage.

#### 7. Professional development

That a professional development program is developed for teachers, caseworkers and other professionals working directly with young Muslim women. Such a program would equip workers with the skills to recognise, respond to and refer potential cases of early marriage appropriately. This should include a cultural competency component and address socio-economic factors driving early and forced marriage. This professional development program should also introduce participants to the relationship between Islam and early marriage.

#### 8. Specialist services funding

That specialist services within the affected Muslim communities are recognised and adequately funded to support young women and their mothers, particularly those at risk of early and forced marriage.

# Appendix 1

## Project information sheet

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) is an organisation of Muslim women working to advance the status of Muslim women in Australia.

The AMWCHR provides a range of practical assistance to women to improve their lives in tangible and measurable ways, and works with service providers and communities in the following areas:

- case work, referrals, secondary consultation and outreach
- advocacy
- community-based program and service delivery
- capacity building
- policy development
- training development and delivery
- research
- publications.

The AMWCHR has been undertaking working with young Muslim women across schools in Victoria for over 20 years. We are currently undertaking research that will help plan our services to meet young women's needs and to gain their views and experiences on marriage and their plans for the future.

We have undertaken one-to-one interviews and focus groups with young women, and are now using surveys to identify general views and opinions of young women.

All surveys are voluntary and are anonymous. No personal information which might identify individual young women will be collected or documented.

To assist young women to complete the survey and ensure that it accurately reflects their views and lived experience, our young women's workers can attend your school/service to facilitate young women's completion of the survey in a one-off session with young women about planning for their future.

In our experience, young women completing the survey in the context of a general discussion about their futures, with a trusted facilitator if possible, best ensures the integrity of the results. Alternatively, the survey can be completed within existing classes or workshops currently running.

The AMWCHR intends to publish a summary of its research to inform service planning among other service providers and schools.

If you have any questions about the survey or the research, please contact our CEO, Joumanah El Matrah at the AMWCHR on 9481 3000.

We look forward to your cooperation and thank you in advance for your contribution to this timely research.

## Appendix 2

# Individual interview questions

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this important interview. It should take about 1 hour.

The Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) is interested in hearing about young Muslim women’s experiences and attitudes about marriage. This research will help us to improve the work we do for young women by providing us with information to develop programs.

Please note:

- This interview is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you don’t want to.
- This is an anonymous interview. No personal information that identifies you as an individual will be collected.

If you have any questions about the interview please contact Joumanah El Matrah at the AMWCHR on 9481 3000.

1. What is your age? .....

2. What is your country of origin? .....

3. Were you born in Australia?  Yes  No

If you chose No, please answer the following questions:

What year did you come to Australia? .....

Did you come to Australia:

- as a refugee
- to join family
- for your parent’s work.

4. As a young woman growing up, did you have dreams or plans about your future? What were they?

.....

.....

.....

5. What did/do you most want to achieve?

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6. Did you think about marriage? Did you want to marry? What kind of marriage and husband did you want?

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7. What did your parents most want for you?

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.....

8. Was marriage important to your family? Was it something that was spoken about? Was it expected of you?

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9. How did you feel about that?

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.....  
.....

10. At what age did you marry? .....

11. Why did you marry at that age?

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.....  
.....

12. Did you want to get married? Why or Why not? Did you want to marry at that age or later?

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13. If you did not want to marry, why not? Did your parents know that you did not want to marry? Do you think you were forced to get married?

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14. Why did your family want you to marry?

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.....

.....

15. How would you describe that marriage or relationship?

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.....

16. Did marriage affect the plans you had for yourself?  Yes  No

17. Are you still married today?  Yes  No

18. In hindsight, what was the impact of marrying early on you and your life? Was it positive/negative? Did it have a positive/negative impact on your relationship with your family/community?

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19. Do you have any other feedback you would like to give about early marriage in your community?

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**Thank you**

# Appendix 3

## Focus group questions

### Women

1. At what age do girls in your community get married? Has the age changed over the years?
2. How old were you?
3. How are marriage decisions taken? Who is involved? Who decides? Are the girls themselves involved?
4. What happens if the girl does not want to marry someone her family chooses? Are girls sometimes pressured into marriages they do not want? How common is this? What kind of pressure do they face?
5. Is there a difference between arranged and forced marriages? If yes, what is this?
6. Are marriages of girls under 18 sometimes arranged in the community in Australia? How common is this? How do such marriages occur?
7. What are the reasons parents want to marry their girls off early?
8. What do you think about marriage before the age of 18 years?
9. What do you think in relation to putting pressure on a girl to marry someone her family has chosen?
10. Does marriage before the age of 18 affect the girl in any way? If so, how?

### Young women

Today, we will be talking about the process of getting married in the Muslim community.

Except for a few questions at the beginning about your goals in life, this session is not about you, your community, your school or your family. It is about the Muslim community in general. If, however, any of you choose to share personal stories, that is OK, and they will be kept CONFIDENTIAL and not reported to anyone *unless there is a risk of abuse involved*. All of you must also commit to keeping any personal information shared confidential.

Your participation is voluntary, which means it is your choice to participate or not to participate.

1. What are your near future goals? What do you plan to do after school?
2. Is there anything that might stand in your way? For example? Can marriage plans interfere?
3. What is a good age for marriage? When do families in the Muslim community generally like their girls to marry?
4. What is the process of making marriage decisions in the Muslim community? Who is involved in marriage decisions, such as when girls will get married and who to marry? How are marriage partners found? Who is consulted? Who makes the decisions? Are girls involved in the decision about their own marriage? If so, how are they involved? If not, how are they told about the decision?
5. Is it the same in all Muslim communities? Are there exceptions?
6. How do girls like you feel about the way marriage decisions are made?
7. Are there times girls are not happy with their family's decision? If so, what might the reasons for this be? In this case, what happens? What do girls do? What do their families do? Are there times families may try and persuade the girls to agree? If so, can you give examples of how? Are there times the marriage takes place even though the girl does not want it?
8. Is the situation the same for young men?
9. How do you think marriage decisions should be made?
10. What are girls' rights (religiously and legally) regarding consent to marriage?



## Professionals

### Objectives

- To identify issues that will culminate in resources that will assist professionals in their response to young people dealing with early / forced marriage.
- To seek feedback from professionals/teachers about early/forced marriage; experiences with young people dealing with marriage generally and the cultural expectations around this.

### Key questions

1. In the event young women do not marry whilst in secondary school, are they expected to marry when they complete their education? Based on your interactions with them, how do they feel about this?
2. What are young people's explanations about why they or people they know are marrying early? Is it consensual?
3. Are young females/males being forced to marry and why?

# Appendix 4

## Questionnaire for young women

### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this important survey. It should take you about 30 minutes to answer.

The Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) is interested in hearing about young Muslim women’s attitudes and experiences about marriage. This research will help us to improve the work we do that helps young women to stay in school and reach their full potential.

Please note:

- This survey is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you don’t want to.
- This is an anonymous survey. No personal information that identifies you as an individual will be collected.

If you have any questions about the survey please contact Joumanah El Matrah at AMWCHR on 9481 3000.

### Questions

If there is not enough space provided for your response, please add additional information on the back of each sheet making sure you reference the question number.

1. What is your age? .....
2. What is your country of origin? .....
3. Were you born in Australia:  Yes  No  
If you chose NO, please answer the following questions.  
What year did you come to Australia? .....
- Did you come to Australia:  
 as a refugee  
 to join family  
 for your parent’s work.
4. What are your goals for the future?  
.....  
.....  
.....

5. What level of education do you want to complete?

- Year 10
- Year 12
- Trade qualification
- University studies
- Post graduate studies
- Other .....

Why? .....

.....

.....

6. Would you like to work?  Yes  No

7. Do you think you will work?  Yes  No

8. What other things would you like to do with your life?

.....

.....

.....

9. Would you like to get married?  Yes  No

10. Does marriage affect the plans you have for yourself?  Yes  No

11. If you answered yes to question 10, how does marriage affect your plans?

.....

.....

.....

12. Thinking of the next few years, what is your most important goal?

.....

.....

.....

13. What do your parents think is the most important thing for you to achieve?

.....  
.....  
.....

14. At what age are you likely to get married?

- |                             |                                |                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14 | <input type="checkbox"/> 17    | <input type="checkbox"/> 22-25       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15 | <input type="checkbox"/> 18    | <input type="checkbox"/> 25-30       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16 | <input type="checkbox"/> 19-21 | <input type="checkbox"/> 30 and over |

15. If it were up to you, at what age would you like to get married?

- |                             |                                |                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14 | <input type="checkbox"/> 17    | <input type="checkbox"/> 22-25       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15 | <input type="checkbox"/> 18    | <input type="checkbox"/> 25-30       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16 | <input type="checkbox"/> 19-21 | <input type="checkbox"/> 30 and over |

16. Who is involved in making marriage decisions?

- You
- Your mother
- Your father
- Others (please list, for example, uncles, aunties etc.) .....

17. How much of a say would you have in the decision to marry?

- It is totally my decision
- The decision is made by me and my parents together
- The decision is made by my parents alone
- Other .....

18. Do you think young women or their parents are best informed to make a decision as to when and who a young woman should marry? Why do you think that?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

19. At what age do most girls in your community get married?

- |                             |                                |                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14 | <input type="checkbox"/> 17    | <input type="checkbox"/> 22–25       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15 | <input type="checkbox"/> 18    | <input type="checkbox"/> 25–30       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16 | <input type="checkbox"/> 19–21 | <input type="checkbox"/> 30 and over |

20. When girls marry before they are 18 years old, why do you think that happens?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

21. Is it a good thing or a bad thing when young women marry before:

- |                                |                             |                             |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14    | <input type="checkbox"/> 18 | <input type="checkbox"/> 22 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16    | <input type="checkbox"/> 20 | <input type="checkbox"/> 24 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ..... |                             |                             |

.....

.....

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22. Do you have any other feedback you would like to give about marriage for young women in your community?

.....

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**Thank you**

## Notes







AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
*Equality without Exception*