

**FORCED
MARRIAGE**

**MY
MARRIAGE,
MY
CHOICE!**



**BRUXELLES POUVOIRS LOCAUX
BRUSSEL PLAATSELIJKE BESTUREN**

**SERVICE PUBLIC RÉGIONAL DE BRUXELLES
GEWESTELIJKE OVERHEIDSDIENST BRUSSEL**

DO YOU FEEL
CONFLICTED,
MAYBE LOST
AND ALONE?

DO YOU HEAR
TALK OF PLANS
FOR YOUR
WEDDING?

DO YOU HAVE
QUESTIONS?
YOU DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO DO?



> *This booklet has been written from the female perspective because girls and young women are the primary victims of forced marriages. However, men and gender minorities can also be forced to marry against their will. The information inside can be useful to all.*

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WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU'RE BEING FORCED TO MARRY?

A. CIVIL MARRIAGE IN BELGIUM

People who want to marry must declare their intention to marry **at least 14 days before the wedding day** to the Civil Registrar. *Until the wedding day, an objection to the marriage can be made* by either of the would-be spouses, a parent, grandparent (or earlier generation) or certain collateral relatives (sibling, cousin, etc.) if no parents or grandparents are alive.¹ A reason must be given for the objection.

The marriage is celebrated in the presence of the mayor or civil registrar in the district where the declaration of the intention to marry was made. It must be no earlier than 14 days and no later than six months after the declaration.

There, the civil registrar asks each of the participants *if they wish to take the other as their spouse*. The registrar then draws up the marriage certificate and hands over a marriage booklet in which a record will be kept of, for example, children to be born and, possibly, the parish in which any religious marriage ceremony takes place. More information can be found on the website Belgium.be.²

The mayor, civil registrar and the registry's officials know that

1 <https://www.actualitesdroitbelge.be/droit-de-la-famille/mariage/le-mariage/la-celebration-du-mariage>

2 <https://www.belgium.be/en/family/marriage/formalities>

forced marriages can and do occur. As forced marriages are illegal, they will be attentive to signs pointing to the marriage being against the will of one or both of the prospective spouses and will be able to prevent it.

During the declaration of intention to marry:

Chances are you will be accompanied, so the best thing to do is to find a way to speak about the problem with a member of the registry alone. The registry will be able to impede the marriage, such as a last-minute check finding a document is invalid or something similar.

If you cannot speak to a registry official in private, you should use body language to convey your unwillingness to marry: do not smile, keep your head down, avoid eye contact. There are many gestures to draw attention to possible coercion. You could also give a look, use head movements or discreet hand gestures to get your message across.

Between the declaration and the actual wedding day:

You have 14 days to return alone to the registry and object to the marriage.

During the wedding:

It will be very difficult to act at this time because of the people that may be around you but you can still object to the marriage before the exchange of vows.

After the wedding:

You could apply for an annulment if the marriage violated Belgian law.

Unlike a divorce, an annulment erases all official traces of the marriage, it is as if the marriage never took place.

However, for an annulment, you will have to fully prove that the marriage was forced (it is necessary to keep all evidence, documents, emails, texts, photos, etc.). It is a fairly cumbersome legal procedure but you can obtain assistance.



B. MARRIAGE ABROAD

Has your family planned a trip abroad and you fear you will be forced to marry?

Speak about your fears to special support agency that will assist you (their contact details are on page 10). You should also tell a person you know and trust about your worries of not being able to return to Belgium.

You and they can decide that they should contact the authorities to find you if you do not return by a specific date.

IMPORTANT: Give them also a copy of documents, identity papers and other information on:

- > the trip: departure and return dates, times, flight number, ticket number, etc.;
- > the stay: address - those travelling with you and the people living there acting as references (first name, surname, address, etc.);
- > any planned celebration/ceremony: date and place;
- > close friends and relatives: contact details of those still in Belgium.

C. CONFISCATION OF IDENTITY DOCUMENTS

You are abroad and your papers are confiscated:

- > if you are Belgian, contact the nearest Belgian embassy/consulate.³ They can grant you a “laissez-passer” that will allow you to return to Belgium. Find and learn by heart their address and telephone number (according to the country where you are);
- > if you are not Belgian, you should go to the police to report the theft/loss of documents. You could also contact your local district in Belgium and ask them to send a residence certificate for you to the Belgian embassy/consulate of the country where you are. You can also request a new national passport or a return visa from the Belgian embassy/consulate. Find and learn by heart their address and telephone number (according to the country where you are)

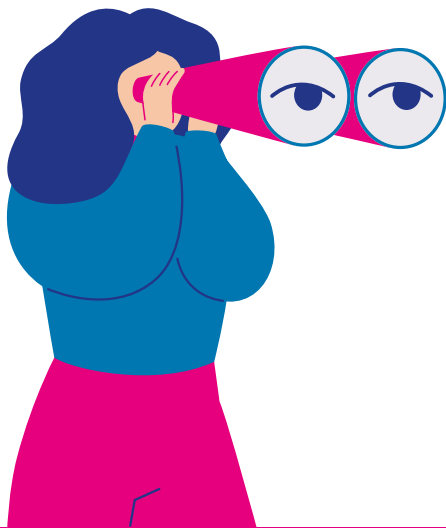
³ https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/services/embassies_and_consulates/belgian_embassies_and_consulates_abroad

D. RESIDENCE PERMIT BASED ON MARRIAGE

If your residence permit is based on your marriage, you will have to contact a special support association that will be able to discuss all the possible solutions with you. Their addresses are below:



All these services are free and confidential



Contact details of support services in the Brussels region

Réseau Mariage et Migration (Marriage and Migration Network)

Rue de l'Alliance 20
1210 Brussels
02/241.91.45
info@mariagemigration.org
<http://www.mariagemigration.org/>

La Voix Des Femmes (The Voice of Women)

Rue de l'Alliance 20
1210 Saint-Josse
02/218.77.87
lvdf@lavoixdesfemmes.org
<https://lavoixdesfemmes.org/>

EXIL (EXILE)

Avenue de la Couronne 282
1050 Brussels
02/534.53.30 - info@exil.be
<https://www.guidesocial.be/exilasbl/>

Police: Forced Marriages Unit

02/249.25.33
cmfzonebruno@gmail.com

Planning Marolles

Rue de la Roue 21
1000 Brussels
02/511.29.90
planningmarolles@skynet.be
<http://planningmarolles.be/index.php/fr/>

**If you have suffered or
at risk of female genital
mutilation:**

GAMS Belgium

Rue Gabrielle Petit 6
1080 Molenbeek-Saint-Jean
02/219.43.40
info@gams.be
<http://gams.be/>

Intact ASBL

Rue des Palais 154
1030 Brussels
02/539.02.04
contact@intact-association.
org
[https://www.intact-association.
org/](https://www.intact-association.org/)

If you have suffered or at risk of abuse:

Centre de Prévention des Violences Conjugales et Familiales (Centre for the Prevention of Spousal and Family Abuse)

Boulevard de l'Abattoir 27-28
1000 Brussels
02/539.27.44
violences.familiales@misc.
irisnet.be
[https://www.
ecouteviolencesconjugales.be/](https://www.ecouteviolencesconjugales.be/)

Centre de Prise en charge des Violences Sexuelles (Centre for Victims of Sexual Abuse)

CHU Saint-Pierre

Rue Haute 322
1000 Brussels
02/535.47.14 - 02/535.45.42
CPVS@stpierre-bru.be
24h/24h, 7jours sur 7
[https://www.stpierre-bru.be/fr/
services-medicaux/gynecologie-
obstetrique/320-rue-haute-1/
centre-de-prise-en-charge-des-
violences-sexuelles-1](https://www.stpierre-bru.be/fr/services-medicaux/gynecologie-obstetrique/320-rue-haute-1/centre-de-prise-en-charge-des-violences-sexuelles-1)

**For minors: SOS enfants-
ULB (SOS children-ULB)**

CHU Saint-Pierre

Rue Haute 322
1000 Brussels
02/535.34.25
sosulb@ulb.ac.be
[https://sos-enfants.ulb.
ac.be/](https://sos-enfants.ulb.ac.be/)

Helplines (freephone):

Réseau Mariage et Migration: 0800/90.901

MONDAY, TUESDAY, FRIDAY 10AM-4PM

WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY 10AM-1PM

Spousal abuse helpline: 0800/30.030 (24/24)

Child helpline: 103 (24/24)

General helpline: 107 (24/24)

Youth helpline: 078/15.44.22 (24/24)

Emergency numbers (freephone):

Police: 101 for emergencies in Belgium.

Emergency services: 112 for emergencies or attacks, used throughout Europe.

112 BE: Smartphone app. Chat available

<https://www.112.be/fr/app>

Websites:

<http://monmariagemappartient.be>

<https://mariages-forces.be/le-mariage-force/>

<https://www.ecouteviolencesconjugales.be/>

<https://www.we-access.eu/fr> (Europe-wide but you can zoom in on Brussels)

II.



MARRIAGE

Marriage is a solemn act in which a heterosexual or same-sex couple form a union between them. It is a strong commitment between two people and, today in our society, it is synonymous with love and free will (certainly not the case in the past!).

In Belgium, if two people want to marry each other, they must:

- > be at least 18 years of age;
- > not be related to one another (siblings, cousins, etc.);
- > be single (it is illegal to be married to more than one person);
- > give their ***free and informed consent***.

The civil marriage is obligatory and takes place in the municipality of residence.

Any religious or traditional ceremony is optional and should only take place after the civil ceremony but ***it has no legal effect***.

There are several types of marriages: a marriage for love, a marriage of convenience (to obtain some advantage, possibly in return for payment), a sham marriage (one partner is not truthful and has an interest in gaining residency), a religious or traditional marriage, an arranged marriage (decided by the family but spouses can consent or refuse), an early marriage (before turning 18), a forced marriage (without the free consent of one of the future spouses).

III.



FORCED MARRIAGES

“There is no marriage [...] where it is contracted without the free consent of both future spouses or the consent of at least one of the future spouses has been obtained through threat or violence.” (Article 146 B of the Belgian Civil Code).

Consent means giving your agreement.

One of the conditions for a marriage is the consent given must be free and informed: before a decision is taken, “all necessary information must have been received and properly understood, along with time to think on the matter without being influenced by any other person” (Amnesty Jeunes – 2020).

Marriage without consent is a forced marriage; it is forbidden under the law: “Whosoever forces another person to enter into a marriage shall be liable to imprisonment for a term not less than three months and not more than five years and a fine ranging from €250 to €5,000. An attempt will be punishable by imprisonment for a term not less than two months and not more than three years and a fine ranging from €125 to €2,500.” ⁴

⁴ Art. 391 E of the Belgian Criminal Code

>> *Have you really given your consent? Here are some questions to help you answer:*

1. *Was your consent **voluntary**? Do you personally want to marry the other person?*
2. *Did your parents or future spouse check that your consent was **unambiguous**? Not **daring to say no** does not mean yes.*
3. *Were you **in a position to fully consent**? Did you have all the necessary information and the time to think about it without any stress or pressure?*
4. *Were you given the time and opportunity to give your consent at every step? Agreeing to meet a guy does not mean agreeing to marry him or having to marry him.*
5. *Consent can be **withdrawn** – you can change your mind and ultimately decide **no**.*

In a forced marriage, the young woman's consent is disregarded.

It has happened that a girl or young woman thinks she is attending a simple family get-together when, in reality, the event is organised to celebrate *her wedding*.

Some girls or young women are not even aware that they have married – they have been threatened, blackmailed or worse but they have never been asked for their consent, **this is a forced marriage**.



A. FORCED MARRIAGE: A FORM OF GENDER VIOLENCE

Marriages are forced on women far more than men showing that this is a form of *gender violence*.

A person's gender determines the role, behaviour and social contacts that a society considers appropriate for men and women (gender is a social construct).

Gender violence is specifically directed at a person because of *their sex* (the biological difference between men and women) and their expected role within society (*gender stereotypes*).

Some stereotypes attributed to girls are to be pretty, obedient, care for others, etc. Whereas boys should be strong, never cry, be in control...

Why the difference between boys and girls?

Society ascribes different roles to boys and girls from the moment they are born; roles they should conform to. From this starting point, the relationship between men and women cannot be equal. We see a *power relationship* placing men above women which is called *the patriarch*.

This gender inequality manifests itself in the consequences of the forced marriage. Depending on the person's gender, the marriage has different effects: the man will retain his freedom, he will not be judged if he has extra-marital affairs, he will not suffer sexual abuse, he will not have to deal with an unwanted pregnancy...



However... You have the same rights as boys!



B. REASONS PUT FORWARD FOR A FORCED MARRIAGE⁵

Families and communities that practice forced marriages do so mainly because of their social, cultural or economic context. While the intention sometimes seems benevolent (protect the daughter or secure her future, maintain family ties, etc.), the act ultimately prevents her from growing up and maturing. Adulthood and independence are removed from her reach.

Preserve one's roots, respect traditions or a religion

Within immigrant communities, some families may see a forced marriage between members of the same culture or group as a way to protect themselves from the outside world and preserve links to their country of origin. In this way, the family feels it is staying faithful to traditions of the old country even though sometimes those traditions are being put to the test in that country of origin.



A desire to preserve and pass down traditions cannot justify the violence of a marriage against your will!

⁵ Source: *Report on the Practice of Forced Marriage in Canada: Interviews with Frontline Workers. Exploratory Research Conducted in Montreal and Toronto in 2008*. Naïma Bendriss

Establish alliances between families

A forced marriage can be a way to uphold a promised alliance with another family of the same community.

This marriage can either be a means for the parents to ensure a better life for their daughter or allow two families to strengthen the community's ties.

If the spouses are related in some way, it can be used to keep material wealth within the family.



**While material security is necessary for all families,
it cannot be at the expense of your interest and dignity!**

Preserve or regain the family's honour

Honour represents the esteem and regard a person is held in when they conduct themselves in a worthy and meritorious manner, according to a number of rules established by a community or society. Honour is synonymous with reputation and dignity. The opposite is shame, dishonour, loss of face, etc.

In some communities, a series of rules must be followed to be considered a self-respecting girl: be obedient, dress in a certain way, do not hang round with boys, remain a virgin until the wedding night, be a good wife and a good mother, etc.

If a young woman deviates from any of these rules, she may be seen as a source of shame for her family. Marriage is then used to maintain or regain the family's honour.

*"Failing to perform that duty can jeopardize the very foundations of the family bond, and individuals who evade that duty risk being shunned."*⁶

This practice falls within the area of ***honour-related violence***: violent behaviour adopted by one or more family members against the individual seen as the source of the family's shame, which can spill over into the wider community. This violence can even result in murder.

6 *Report on the Practice of Forced Marriage in Canada: Interviews with Frontline Workers. Exploratory Research Conducted in Montreal and Toronto in 2008. Naïma Bendriss p.12*



**Showing each and every person mutual respect,
regardless of age or sex, is this not more honourable
than placing a family's entire honour on your
shoulders alone?**

Deal with a pregnancy out of wedlock

Some cultures place great weight on the concept of a young woman's virginity; it symbolises the young woman's honour and purity and, by extension, that of the family and community.

However, the concern placed on remaining a virgin only affects daughters. Once again, gender stereotypes and male dominance rear their ugly heads: there is no stigma attached to a son losing his virginity outside of marriage.

As a corollary, the parents may force their daughter to marry the father of a child conceived out of wedlock to "regain" the family's honour and reputation.



**Losing your virginity or conceiving a child is your concern.
It cannot justify forcing you into a marriage!**

Control a daughter's sexuality

Born from this fear of a pregnancy out of wedlock or the loss of their daughter's virginity, some parents marry their daughter off very young. This marriage, purportedly to maintain their reputation, allows parents to control the sexuality of their daughter and maintain patriarchal power over her.

Another aspect in keeping with gender stereotypes presents itself in parents finding it unbelievable that they have a child with a gender identity that does not match their sex (such as a transgender person), or with a sexual orientation that is not strictly heterosexual (for example, homosexual or bisexual). Forced marriage is then practised to *restore the honour* of the family and "*cure the gay*" – an impossibility since homosexuality is not an illness but a natural sexual and/or romantic attraction to a person of the same sex, something that cannot be controlled.



Your romantic relations, your sexuality, your sexual orientation... are your business!

Protect an “underage” daughter

In certain families and communities, daughters are considered as children throughout their entire lives. Someone has to protect them and act for them, *for their own good...*

Marriage represents a means to place their daughter in a safe and secure setting, especially if the husband is from the same family or community.

Yet, it is the parents who, through their anxieties, impede their child’s development, depriving her of the means to learn how to take care of herself.



**You are just as capable to take care of yourself as any boy
if you are given the chance to act for yourself!**



C. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF A FORCED MARRIAGE?

Being forced to marry can have repercussions on a person's physical and mental health, such as ⁷:

BEFORE MARRIAGE

Family and social pressures

Increased supervision and control

Blackmail, intimidation, insults

Restrictions

(on going out, mobile, money, food, identity papers, confinement, etc.)

Banned from going to school

Isolation, loneliness

Violence in all forms

(verbal, physical, psychological, etc.), death threats

Procedures for hymen reconstruction to assert virginity
leading to health problems, possible infections,
impacts on sexuality...

**Ambivalence, loyalty, internal conflict, feeling of betrayal,
loss of bearings, loss of self-confidence and
trust in others**

⁷ Source: GAMS Belgium, *Mariage forcé et asile – Fiche spécifique 2*, GBV & Asylum – Learn & act, Brussels, 2019.



AFTER MARRIAGE

Forced and unprotected sexual relations (i.e., rape): -

Unwanted pregnancy

Violence in all forms

(verbal, physical, psychological, etc.)

Increased supervision and control

Forced to drop out of school/training/work

to take care of children, housework, in-laws

**Loss of freedom, loss of social and economic
independence**

Eating disorders, sleep disorders

**Feelings of shame, low self-esteem and self-confidence,
disgust, anxiety**

Depression, self-cutting, suicidal thoughts

IV.



WARNING SIGNS BEFORE A POSSIBLE MARRIAGE

Once you become an adolescent, you may notice certain details that seem trivial but, in fact, they should put you on alert:

- > you are in a relationship with a person of a culture/religion different to yours. Your parents disapprove of it as well as of how you think and dress;
- > you have male friends and your parents worry about “what the neighbours will say”;
- > your family controls your outings and people visiting you, especially if boys are involved – and you must now be accompanied;
- > your family talks to you and shows you photos of men that they would like you to meet or show your photos to, etc.;
- > you have a sister or cousin who was already married in this way, you may have even attended the wedding;
- > your family has holiday plans to your or your parents’ home country. You want to go but, at the same time, they seem to be hiding something from you. They talk about a celebration but you do not know for who or why;

- > your mobile or computer might be confiscated, making it difficult to talk to people outside your family;
- > your family forbids you from seeing certain friends who are “not good for you”, you cannot attend school outings or you can no longer go to school;
- > your family is adamant that marriage is important for your future. Your love and loyalty to them may be used to stop you refusing to marry;
- > you are threatened and/or beaten by relatives if you refuse to marry (can't go out, phone confiscated, deprived of food and freedom, abuse, confinement, etc.);
- > abuse can be physical (slaps, kicks, etc.), psychological (pressure, emotional blackmail), verbal (shouts, insults...) and even material and administrative (loss of pocket money, confiscated mobile and/or identity papers);

Several forms of abuse may be used against you at the same time.



In all cases, if you have doubts, it's because something is not right. You will have to act quickly because a forced marriage will have serious repercussions for you!

When faced with a planned forced marriage, it is normal to feel lost and scared, have no idea what to do, how to react. What's more, going against the decision of your family is very difficult: love for your parents and blood ties are extremely powerful. It is also very frightening to take a leap into the unknown and to find the strength and courage to take control of your own life.

But, getting off that path toward a forced marriage requires taking such a risk because avoiding all the serious consequences mentioned above is of the utmost importance.



The first thing to do is to act, *do not stay alone and speak to someone outside of your family*. Then, contact as quickly as possible one of the special support associations (contact details on p 10).

These associations have professional teams who can provide psychological, legal, social and other aid and assistance to young girls and women, FREE OF CHARGE.

Asking for help is not easy, especially when we do not know how these professional helpers work. But rest assured that any meeting with a support service:

- > will be kept secret from your parents and family and nothing you say will get back to them. The team are under a duty of professional secrecy and cannot disclose anything you say to your family;
- > you can bring someone you trust with you (a teacher, friend, a member of your school's Psycho-Medical-Social Centre, etc.);
- > you will be warmly welcomed without any judgement. The team is there for you and will listen to you talk about your fears and needs in your own time, while respecting your choices.
- > you will be guided and assisted in your next steps according to your situation, for example, legal assistance in asserting your rights, or requesting financial aid or accommodation;
- > in an emergency, you can be placed in a safehouse while a long-term solution is found for you. The address will be kept secret for your safety.

It is essential that you bring a *copy of all your identification documents* when you visit the service.

These papers will be required for administrative procedures, asserting your rights, making aid requests... It is important you have access to them.



V.



CONCLUSION

Going against the will of your family and taking control of your life is probably the most difficult and painful decision anyone can make. It requires immense courage. But you are not alone and on every step of the way, you will find the support you need!

DON'T
STAY ALONE,
**HELP IS
OUT THERE!**

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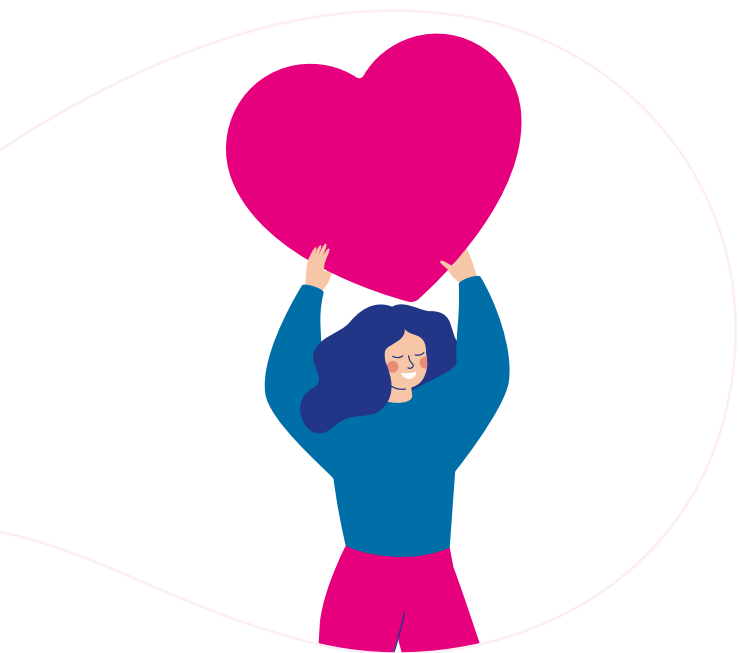
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From the time you became an adolescent, you have heard your parents plan for your wedding.

This marriage makes them extremely proud as you will carry on their traditions and fulfil the wishes of your family. They see it as a guarantee of your future happiness and security. However, you do not feel so ready, you want to continue your studies, see your friends. You have not thought about marriage or having children. In any case, you want to decide for yourself.

You are worried about disappointing your parents if you do not follow their wishes...

Does refusing mean you risk losing them and finding yourself alone? How can you be loyal to your family and true to yourself? What will happen if you say “No”?

This booklet will help you see things more clearly, make your own path and know that there are people who can help, support and guide you in your choices.



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