

**The Government's  
Action Plan  
for 2003-2005  
on Forced,  
Quasi-forced and  
Arranged Marriages**

**15 August 2003**

**The Danish Government**

## ■ Foreword

With this action plan the government wants to send a powerful signal: that it is unacceptable for young people to be forced or pressured into a marriage against their will.

Respect for values such as free choice, protection of the individual and gender equality is vital. A democratic society is based on personal freedom. This means that all young people, regardless of ethnic background, should be able to choose their own spouse.

The lessons learned about arranged and forced marriages over the last many years show that we need new social and integration strategies to prevent even more young people suffering an unhappy fate.

According to the Danish crisis centres for women, 51.6% of the women from non-Danish ethnic backgrounds who contact the centres are family reunification immigrants (annual report for 2002 of the National Organisation of Shelters for Battered Women and Children). This issue will be one of the main challenges for the integration process going forward.

We must put the problem of forced and arranged marriages on the agenda. We must get better at helping young people who do not want to marry a distant relative or a person from their parents' country of origin against their wishes.

The action plan contains 21 initiatives to:

- Prevent forced marriages
- Discourage unhappy family reunifications based on arranged marriages
- Contribute to better integration and increase gender equality
- Help increase the focus on the marital problems of ethnic minority youth in Denmark
- Disseminate information about focus areas to everyone who comes into contact with ethnic minorities, such as doctors, social workers, health visitors and teachers.

Teachers and caseworkers in Denmark do a huge job to integrate young people from ethnic minorities into Danish society. They teach these young people Danish and the many social and cultural codes necessary for living in Denmark. The problem is that they are now seeing the collapse of their efforts, either when the young people, usually the girls, return from a long involuntary stay in the country of origin, or when they are taken out of a Danish secondary school and sent to an ethnic private school instead. This often happens when parents think their children have become 'too Danish' and take them to their country of origin to 're-educate' them or prepare them for a wedding.

The campaign against forced marriages thus affects every aspect of ethnic minority integration in Denmark.

Danes need to overcome their fear of involvement and reluctance to address the issue of forced marriages on the grounds

that it is the religion and culture that dictate the practice. It is perfectly possible to respect other people's religion and culture while making demands and working to prevent forced and arranged marriages that lead to unhappy family reunifications.

Bertel Haarder

Henriette Kjær

## ■ Arranged and forced marriages

### Background

Arranged marriages are commonplace in large areas of the world. Families and relatives provide a security network for each other to a greater extent than in Western countries, and the support of the family is crucial for the existence and living conditions of the individual. The choice of marriage partner thus becomes a collective concern rather than a personal decision.

This tradition has been brought to Denmark, and in some immigrant and refugee communities, it is normal for families and relatives to arrange marriages. It is typically the parents who suggest marriage candidates. Practices vary as to how much influence the intending spouses have and how much the parents decide.

Some young people from non-Danish ethnic backgrounds have entrusted their families with the task of finding and choosing partners for them, and thus relinquished the right to decide for themselves.

Young people from ethnic minorities in Denmark who are to be married to a person from their parents' home country face the risk of becoming locked in a family structure that does not allow them the same personal freedom as their Danish friends.

Second-generation immigrants have better knowledge of Danish culture than their parents and older relatives. Their Danish

education and friends give them expectations for the future that differ from those of their parents. Girls in particular are at risk of clashing with their parents, because women traditionally have far less freedom of movement and self-determination than men. The parents' desire to arrange marriages or choose marriage partners for young people may reflect their wish to retain the young people in a marital pattern and culture with which they are familiar. A forced marriage may be a reaction to longstanding generational and cultural conflict.

When traditions and family considerations clash with the young people's wishes, they may end up under strong pressure to give up a love affair or enter into marriage. The marriage is no longer the expression of a voluntary and personal decision. Under Danish legislation, it is against the law to force someone into a marriage, and the marriage can be annulled if the case is brought before a court.

A forced marriage is one in which one of the parties feels he or she has been subjected to coercion or duress and has had no real choice in the matter. Parents may use threats, physical violence or psychological pressure to coerce young people to enter into marriage.

There is a need to provide information to both generations, parents and young people alike, and to offer refuge and counselling.

**In marriages between close relatives**, there is a higher risk of children being born with conditions such as a serious congenital disease, developmental defect or mental disability. Almost 2.5% of children born each year in Western Europe have a hereditary condition that requires care and treatment, whereas the risk is twice as high for children of closely related parents. The risk is even higher if the parents and grandparents are also closely related.

## Extent of the problem

Various counselling bodies and women's crisis centres are regularly contacted by young people for help or advice. They may for example be under pressure to enter marriage or have already married against their wishes. They may be threatened with violence because they want to escape from a marriage. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of ethnic minority women contacting crisis shelters.

There is no general statistical overview of marriage patterns among ethnic minority groups in Denmark, but several surveys have addressed the issue of arranged and forced marriages. It is hard to define the two forms of marriage, and we need more information about the nature and extent of the problem. A major study of marriage patterns among ethnic minorities in Denmark has already been initiated.

**A study by the Danish National Institute of Social Research** shows that among young 'new Danes' from a Turkish background, 91% were married to a partner from the home country. For people with an ex-Yugoslavian background, the figures are 57% for women and 67% for men, and for people with a Pakistani background, 88% for women and 78% for men. A small group (less than 10%) married a person from the same ethnic background living in Denmark.

*From '20 years on' (in Danish only)  
by Garbi Schmidt and Vibeke Jakobsen,  
the Danish National Institute of Social Research*

## ■ Goals and content of the action plan

In Denmark it is customary for young people to choose their own marriage partner and enter a marriage based on a loving relationship.

Some ethnic minority communities in Denmark continue the traditional practices of their home country where parents choose a marriage partner for their children. These arranged marriages can cause serious problems between generations because young people are becoming increasingly better integrated with Danish society and therefore want to choose their own marriage partner. The parents may react by putting pressure on the young people or threatening to break off all contact with them.

The practice of arranged marriages is a violation of the right of the individual to freely find and choose a spouse.

The government wants to use this action plan to prevent the use of force and to encourage young ethnic minority men and women to choose their own marriage partner.

The government's goals are:

- To change attitudes so all young people have the opportunity to choose a marriage partner
- To support and help young people who are exposed to force and duress in connection with marriage
- To reinforce preventive initiatives by the authorities

- To strengthen cooperation between private and public organisations
- To contribute to efficient integration initiatives and increased gender equality.

'We should not use "culture" as an excuse for suppressive family patterns.'

*From 'The Government's Vision and Strategies for Improved Integration', June 2003.*

### A multi-faceted initiative

This issue needs to be tackled from numerous angles. The main focus will therefore be on preventive and attitude-changing initiatives and on crisis help for young people in difficulties.

In addition, the action plan will follow up on and support initiatives launched as a result of the decision by the political parties promoting the special allocation fund to earmark a portion of the funds for stepping up initiatives to stop forced marriages and family-related violence among ethnic minorities.

To reach the target group for the initiative – ethnic minority youth from cultures that practice arranged marriages and their parents – we need better information, dialogue and cooperation. Publishing a single pamphlet cannot undo years of tradition. Information about rights and offers of help should therefore also be disseminated through specially prepared educational

materials, youth magazines, the Internet and direct dialogue at schools and in clubs – elements that will be part of a national information campaign in spring 2004.

Support and advice are another important element. An independent helpline will be set up to strengthen personal and individual advisory services. Networks and associations aimed at girls and women in particular will also be supported.

This action plan has a second target group: the professional workers who meet young people in crisis such as healthcare personnel, teachers, social workers and advisors. They need information about arranged and forced marriages. They need to learn to read the signals of young people who have been victims of direct or indirect force. They should be able to mediate and help resolve conflicts between the generations, and know where to get help.

To strengthen and qualify the initiative, guidelines will be prepared about how to deal with arranged and forced marriages. Better information for local authorities about the national ethnic advisory service will be developed, word will be spread about an internet-based toolkit, and nationwide courses and seminars will be held to increase the knowledge and skills of professionals.

Preventive measures are a prerequisite for change. However, we must provide help in cases where such measures fail, and young people are compelled to leave their families. Young women in particular are severely

affected. A special refuge will be set up for them, which must also be able to provide further help with education and getting a job. There will be focus on offering help to women who have lived in crisis shelters and on supporting networks of young people who have broken all contact with their families. A special element of the information campaign will be to inform the victims of forced marriages abroad, or people being threatened with such marriages, about the option of help from Danish embassies and consulates.

The work of eliminating arranged and forced marriages in Denmark is a new initiative. We have drawn inspiration from other European countries, ethnic minority associations, researchers and government research institutes. However, we need to conduct more research and collect more information about the scope of the problem and how to solve it. The more information we have, the better we can target our initiatives. The last section of the action plan therefore concerns support for research and information gathering.

Already in June 2002, the government introduced legislative measures to intensify efforts to prevent forced and arranged marriages. Amendments were made to the immigration and marriage acts, raising the age requirement for family reunification marriage partners from 18 to 24. It was also decided that as a general rule, permission for family reunification will not be given if it is considered doubtful that the marriage was entered into according to the wishes of both

partners. The changes in the rules have already proved highly effective, and no further legislative initiatives have therefore been taken in conjunction with this action plan.

The focus areas of the action plan are:

- Information
- Dialogue and cooperation
- Counselling
- Intensified efforts by local authorities
- Clubs for girls
- Follow-up
- Residential facilities
- Research and documentation.

### Focus areas

Various initiatives have been taken in recent years to support young people from ethnic minorities who have been the victims of duress and force in connection with marriage. Public and private organisations have set up counselling services, and several NGOs have received financial support for specific projects.

A number of these projects have been financed through the special allocation funds. The special allocation for preventing forced marriages is managed by the Ministry of Refugee Immigration and Integration Affairs, which works with relevant partners such as other ministries and organisations.

In future, initiatives will focus on prevention and on providing information and crisis help to young people from non-Danish ethnic backgrounds.

**The National Organisation of Shelters for Battered Women and Children (LOKK)** has been granted funds to start a nationwide team of professional counsellors to offer free advice to local authorities in concrete cases of forced marriages or marriages where coercion seems to have been a factor.

### Information

Young people from non-Danish ethnic backgrounds need information about their rights and where to turn for advice and guidance if they are being coerced or pressured into marriage. The number of applications for family reunification from people under 24 is still high, indicating that there is a need to provide targeted information about the new rule to young people and their parents.

It is also important that professionals in the area and others who come into contact with ethnic minority youth can find relevant information about how best to help them. They should have access to information about how they can provide help and about services to which they can refer young people.

- A leaflet with targeted information for young people from ethnic minority back-

grounds is being prepared, as well as a leaflet about arranged and forced marriages aimed at their parents. The leaflets are being prepared in several languages and will be supplemented with information in youth magazines, on the Internet, specially prepared educational materials, handy cards with useful telephone numbers, and so on.

- These leaflets will also contain information to young people and their parents about the 24-year rule and its implications for applications for family reunification.
- Professional journals and websites, for example, will be used to pass on information to teachers, social workers and others in contact with people affected by forced marriages about the support services to which they can refer young people.
- Books and other materials will be published for use in the instruction and continuing education of community workers like teachers, social workers and the police.

## **Dialogue and cooperation**

It is important to build understanding between young people and their parents, and create opportunities for ethnic minority women to discuss forced marriages and choice of marriage partner as well as broader issues like gender roles and equality. We also need to promote greater understanding between ethnic minorities and the rest of

society, the groundwork for long-term changes in attitude.

Initiatives and projects to stimulate debate and changes in attitude are therefore a high priority.

- Talks will be given, offering the opportunity to discuss and provide information on women's rights, and to address generational and cultural divides. The focus will be on initiatives to strengthen dialogue and common understanding.
- Projects to develop networks and associations for women will be supported. Examples of support for starting associations include help with finding suitable meeting rooms, drawing up regulations and holding general meetings. Support will also be given to develop networks between women and the associations.
- Local authorities are encouraged to assign professional resources to mediation and conflict resolution in the work of helping families, as appropriate and when desired by young persons so they can stay in contact with their families.
- Seminars will be held to enhance the mediation skills of professionals.
- A six-monthly seminar will be held for everyone involved to share experience, information and ideas for new initiatives to strengthen and improve efforts in the field.

**The Council for Ethnic Minorities** believes mediation is key to the work of eradicating forced marriages. Experience shows that it is hard for young people to handle a breach with their families because they are used to living in a close-knit family environment. Mediation can only take place if a genuine crisis has not developed and only if all parties consent to attempt mediation.

## Counselling

Young people should be offered personal and individual counselling if they are being exposed to force or pressure in connection with marriage. Many young people are reluctant to contact their local authority for fear of the authority contacting their parents.

- An independent helpline will be set up for young people to contact anonymously for expert advice and information.

The parents of a 20-year-old girl want her to get married, which she is against. The parents persist in introducing her to potential husbands, whom she turns down. She feels under great pressure to accept marriage. She has a boyfriend who has been the victim of violence by her own family.

She fears that her life will be in danger if she defies her family's wishes.

*Case from the advisory service of the National Organisation of Shelters for Battered Women and Children for professional workers dealing with forced marriages.*

## The work of the embassies

Young people who are about to be forced into marriage during a visit abroad need advice in a particularly difficult situation. They rarely have a chance to seek out advice and may need help to return quickly to Denmark. The foreign service will help to the extent possible. It is therefore important to spread the word that young people can contact the Danish embassy or consulate in the country in question for help in such situations. The information campaign for young people should therefore draw special attention to this option.

- The information material for young people and their parents will in particular contain information about the option of contacting a Danish diplomatic representations in the particular country in cases where young people are abroad in connection with a forced marriage.

**The foreign service** offers help, if the victim so wishes, in cases where a Danish national or a person with permanent residence in Denmark has been forced into, or is being forced into, marriage abroad. The type of

help will depend entirely on the specific circumstances and may, if deemed appropriate, consist of mediating with the people affected in the foreign country and helping the victim to return to Denmark, including getting the necessary identification papers for travel and tickets, and other practical help for the journey. The help often calls for a pragmatic approach that takes the specific circumstances of the case into account. The foreign service cannot, however, cover the expenses involved without payment in advance or suitable security.

### **Intensified efforts by local authorities**

As it is often the local authorities that have to process cases of forced and arranged marriage, they must know how to handle cases where one of the spouses wants to escape from the marriage.

- Guidelines are being prepared for local authorities containing solution models, advice and ideas for how to deal with these complex cases.
- All local authorities must have information about the national ethnic advisory service supported by the government, which offers free consulting assistance in concrete cases. Targeted information will be sent to the authorities.
- The Internet-based toolkit of the National Organisation of Shelters for Battered

Women and Children aimed at local authority caseworkers will be updated regularly. The toolkit contains guidelines, information about the statutory framework and legal practice, security procedures, plus contact details for crisis help and other places where young people can seek further support.

- Qualification courses will be held for various professional groups, including local authority caseworkers.

In the Høje-Taastrup local authority district, we have seen a steadily increasing number of forced marriage cases.

Caseworkers find it difficult to deal with these extremely complex cases, for which there are no easy solutions. The cases vary greatly in nature and thus require a range of solutions that are only possible through detailed insight into the cultures of the young people and their parents coupled with specific conflict resolution tools. Cases can only be resolved by a combination of dialogue between the family and the authorities, and the will to consider cultural renewal.

*From the project application for 'Beredskab og kampagne mod tvangsægteskaber' [Preparing measures and campaigning against forced marriages] from Høje-Taastrup local authority.*

## Clubs for girls

Many girls from non-Danish ethnic backgrounds do not use the established recreational opportunities that are available. Unlike ethnic minority boys, many of them are not allowed to leave the home unsupervised and need a meeting place that has their parents' approval – a girls' club. Clubs for girls are important, providing them with a haven for discussion where they can also get advice and guidance. It is important for the girls' self-understanding, and will stand them in good stead later if they have to resist attempts to force them into marriage. Our goal is for parents to accept that their daughters take part in the same recreational activities as other young people.

- Support will be given to set up and run clubs for girls.
- The clubs will develop networks for sharing experience, organising events, discussing shared problems, etc.

Youth schools should give girls the scope to develop the self-confidence, self-esteem and self-understanding that will equip them to make decisions of their own free will. The right of free choice applies not only to marriage but to a great extent also to all other important aspects of a young girl's life.

*From the description of a project by Sønderborg youth school to establish a club for girls*

## Follow-up

Follow-up mechanisms must be put into operation when young people are compelled to leave their family and network. They should not be left alone with their problems but be helped to get on with their life and join the education system and labour market.

- Support and networks will be developed for young people who have left their family. This may take the form of home visit volunteers, mentor programmes or formal networks led by local authority case-workers or similar.
- Activities that ease the transition from living in a crisis shelter to life in the community will be supported. Support may take the form of courses at youth schools, library reading groups, continuing training for social workers who keep in touch with the young people, etc.

**The Council for Ethnic Minorities** draws attention to the central importance of retaining ethnic minority girls in the education system for as long as possible. Education plays a key role for the ability of ethnic minority girls to resist attempts to force them into marriage. Better educated ethnic minority girls will thus be far better equipped to withstand attempts at forced marriage than girls with less education.

## Residential facilities

Young people who find it necessary to leave their families following conflict with their parents about forced marriage have an acute housing need. Women over 18 are referred to crisis shelters in Denmark. These centres are, however, often ill-equipped to deal with the problems surrounding forced and arranged marriages, and living in a crisis shelter can be a traumatic experience for these young women, who have typically led a highly protected existence.

- Crisis shelters and other residential facilities will be set up for young ethnic girls and women who have been forced into marriage or are at risk of having to accept a forced or arranged marriage. Girls and women in this target group may also have been victims of violence or been threatened with violence if they escape from their marriage.

Accommodation in a crisis shelter or other form of housing should be an option for young ethnic girls and women who are fleeing from their family because of violence or threats of violence, for example in connection with attempts to force them to enter – or remain in – a marriage against their wishes.

Crisis shelters should be open for girls and women to contact directly, or for referrals by the authorities (police, social services, etc.). Owing to the often serious nature of the rifts between young women and their family, the safety of the women and crisis

shelter staff is a paramount concern. This group of women may have suffered violence and threats of a brutal nature, in some cases life threatening.

Crisis shelters and other places of accommodation should be able to give the girls and women counselling and treatment so that they can live an independent life and if possible re-establish contact with their family. During their period of residence, the girls should also be given help to establish a new sustainable social network.

Crisis shelters or residential facilities should be able to help ethnic minority girls and women become better integrated into Danish culture and society, for example, by supporting them in taking education or training or getting a job, and by helping them clarify their future. The place of accommodation should also act as a network for these young women.

According to annual statistics published by the **National Organisation of Shelters for Battered Women and Children**, in 2002, ethnic minority women made up 39.9% of all women (1,935 in total) admitted to crisis shelters. The figures comprise foreign women who have become Danish nationals as well as women who are immigrants, asylum-seekers, family reunification immigrants or refugees.

## Research and documentation

It is important to conduct research and collect more knowledge about this issue; the more information we have about the problem, the better we can target initiatives to resolve it.

- The government supports research and knowledge gathering about the nature and extent of the problem.

**The Danish National Institute of Social Research (SFI)** has been granted funds for a study of marriage patterns among ethnic minorities in Denmark. The purpose of the study is to create greater clarity about all the broader issues surrounding forced marriage. It will provide an overview of experience gained to date, and the significance of the 24-year rule and the attachment requirement. It will also contribute to collecting information about the problem to help make future initiatives more effective. The report is expected to be finished in April 2004.

## ■ Legislation

Denmark has passed legislation and acceded to international conventions that enshrine the right to freely choose a marriage partner. For a marriage to be valid, it must be entered into without force.

The United Nations convention on women's rights states that men and women have the same right to freely choose a spouse and to marry only with their free and unconditional consent. The UN conventions on marriage and on civil and political rights also stress that marriage may only be entered into with the free and full consent of the intending parties.

### **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. Article 16.**

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

### **The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966. Article 23.**

1. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.
2. The right of men and women of marriageable age to marry and to found a family shall be recognized.
3. No marriage shall be entered into without the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
4. States Parties to the present Covenant shall take appropriate steps to ensure equality of rights and responsibilities of spouses as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. In the case of dissolution, provision shall be made for the necessary protection of any children.

**The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979. Article 16.**

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:
  - (a) The same right to enter into marriage;
  - (b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent (...)

Forced marriages are prohibited by internationally recognized human rights conventions and Danish law. The general rules contained in the Danish Criminal Code concerning the prohibition of threats to force others to do something against their free will also applies to marriage. Under the provisions of the Danish Marriage Act, a marriage entered into as a consequence of duress may be annulled.

**The Danish Criminal Code, section 260**

Any person who:

1. by violence or under threat of violence, of substantial damage to property, of the deprivation of liberty or of a false accusation of having committed a punishable act or dishonourable conduct or of revealing matters appertaining to someone's private affairs, forces any person to do, suffer or omit to do anything; or who
2. under threat of denouncing or revealing a punishable act or making true accusations of dishonourable conduct, forces any person to do, suffer or omit to do anything, provided such coercion is not deemed to be duly justified by virtue of the circumstances to which the threat relates,

shall be guilty of unlawful coercion and liable to a fine or to simple detention or to imprisonment for any term not exceeding two years.

In June 2002, as part of the government's intensified efforts to prevent forced marriages, amendments were made to several laws, including the marriage and immigration acts, introducing a general increase in the age requirement from 18 to 24 in cases of family reunification of marriage partners. The means that in principle, residence per-

mits will only be granted in family reunification cases when both spouses are over the age of 24.

The amendments were made on the grounds that the older a person is, the better he or she can resist attempts by family or others to force them into marriage against their wishes. The aim is to protect young

people from coercion in connection with marriage.

Furthermore, a new general rule was passed under which, as a predominant principle, permission for family reunification will not be granted if it is considered doubtful that the marriage was entered into according to the wishes of both partners.

On the basis of data from Statistics Denmark, the Ministry of Refugee Immigration and Integration Affairs has conducted a survey of marriage patterns among various age groups of foreigners living in Denmark.

The analysis revealed clearly that age at the time of marriage is a significant factor in whether male and female immigrants and their descendants marry a person resident abroad or a person resident in Denmark.

Of 18-20-year-old female immigrants and their descendants from less developed third countries who married in 2001, 68% married a person abroad, whereas the rate among the 21-23 year group was 62% and 55% in the 24-26 year group. Among 18-20-year-old men, 78% entered into marriage with a person resident abroad, while the corresponding rates for 21-23-year-olds and 24-26-year-olds were 65% and 64%.

The analysis will be published in *Statistical Yearbook of Foreigners in Denmark – Current Status and Development Trends*.

## ■ International experience

In preparing the action plan, the government has drawn on initiatives implemented in other countries.

**Norway:** Forced marriages have been discussed and recognized as a serious problem in Norway for a long time. The Norwegian government published an action plan against forced marriages in December 1998. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs had the main responsibility for the action plan, which contained 40 initiatives covering a broad spectrum of topics including preparing information leaflets, crisis help, school involvement, international cooperation and research. The government also asked ethnic minorities and religious leaders to assume some of the responsibility for preventing forced marriages happening. In Norway, forcing someone into marriage against their wishes is punishable by law, and can incur a prison sentence of up to three years.

An evaluation of the initiatives, which was part of the action plan, was published in February 2002. In the spring of 2002 a report entitled *Renewed Initiative against Forced Marriage* was published, a continuation of the action plan of 1998 and containing 30 new initiatives. The action plan is thus an active tool that is revised and improved on an ongoing basis.

Among other things, the evaluation recommended:

- Better follow-up on projects to ensure they achieve their goals

- Providing residential facilities for girls as an alternative to crisis shelters
- Using a joint feedback form to ensure uniform registration of contact
- Holding seminars for sharing experience
- Increasing the expertise of professionals.

‘Combating forced marriage is a community concern and also therefore a community responsibility. Individuals cannot, however, be absolved of responsibility and ultimately it is the ones who use force or cause force to be used that are responsible. Good routines are vital during a crisis but long-term planning is no less important.’

*From the Norwegian government report ‘Renewed Initiative against Forced Marriage. Spring 2002.*

**Sweden:** Sweden has focused on girls in patriarchal families, and in February the Swedish government published a report on its initiatives for girls at risk in patriarchal families. Initiatives were targeted at women and girls from patriarchal families for whom lack of freedom, coercion, persecution and violence are everyday occurrences. The goal was a comprehensive approach to the problems encountered by girls at risk in patriarchal families. The project thus focuses on both girls and their families. In addition Sweden changed its marriage laws so that the current marriage age is 18 for Swedes and non-Swedish nationals alike.

A large number of girls in patriarchal families are exposed to physical and psychological violence and threats. One of the risks they face is being married against their wishes, and they need the protection of society.

*From the Swedish County Administration report on the coordination of local authority initiatives for girls at risk in patriarchal families.*

On 21 May 2003, the government launched an initiative against 'honour-related violence' as the everyday lives of many girls and young women are characterised by lack of freedom, coercion or violence. Those living in environments that uphold high chastity ideals are at particular risk. When these girls and women are harassed, they are often totally alone with their problems as their immediate family and relatives are the cause. The primary focus of the government's initiative is preventive work and better protection of the individual. The Swedish National Board of Health and

Welfare has conducted a survey showing that every year, several hundred girls apply to the authorities for protection against their families.

**Britain:** A working group was set up in 2000, and its findings published in June 2000 in a report about forced marriage entitled '*A Choice by Right*'. In August 2000, the British Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office responded to the report and published an action plan '*Forced marriage – the overseas dimension*'. The action plan contains guidelines and recommendations for British diplomatic and consular offices in their work with forced marriages. A special Foreign Office unit was also set up to work exclusively with forced marriages, and police guidelines for dealing with cases of forced marriage, including 'best practice', were published.

In Britain, the initiative has focused on help for girls forced to marry abroad who cannot return to Britain.

## ■ How can we improve?

It is important that we collect experience in the field for use in the further work of tackling forced, quasi-forced and arranged marriages. If anyone has a good idea that has the desired effect it is important that others can learn and gain inspiration from it. It is also important to learn from problems and unforeseen challenges that have necessitated project adjustments.

The experience and knowledge gathered from government-supported projects will therefore be incorporated in the government's continued work for reinforced initiatives to prevent forced, quasi-forced and arranged marriages, and can be viewed at the experience database of the Ministry of Refugee Immigration and Integration Affairs at [www.erfaringsdatabasen.dk](http://www.erfaringsdatabasen.dk)

## ■ Good ideas and initiatives

Every year, the **children's holiday programme of Save the Children Denmark** helps children who need a break from a difficult home life and something to look forward to during the holidays. The children's holiday programme runs holiday and weekend programmes offering socially deprived children the opportunity to meet new people and have new experiences, which are often lacking in their daily lives. Most of the children are from single-parent families, usually single mothers. A quarter of the children come from a non-Danish ethnic background. For more information, visit [www.redbarnet.dk](http://www.redbarnet.dk)

**Somalian Mother Community** has been granted funds to set up and run a combined counselling and activity centre for young Somalians, with two days a week reserved for girls. The activity centre has a person available to assist the young people in joining the education system or the job market. The idea is also to get parents involved in the work of the centre.

**The Danish Red Cross** has been granted funds to start and implement a care programme for women and children from non-Danish ethnic backgrounds after they have left a crisis centre. The project includes home visit volunteers and families, networking activities and activities for children. The

care package is intended to combat the loneliness and isolation that arise in the time after a period of residence at a crisis centre and to help make integration into Danish society a positive experience for these women and children. The project is based on providing help for self-help and aims to boost mothers' sense of self-worth. For more information, see [www.drk.dk](http://www.drk.dk)

**The Danish Women's Society** has held a nationwide information campaign on the support options open to girls and women from a non-Danish ethnic background who are trapped in a cultural and gender dilemma, with special focus on forced and arranged marriages. The long-term goal is for women from other ethnic backgrounds to build networks and learn about their rights. More information is available at [www.kvindesamfund.dk](http://www.kvindesamfund.dk)

**The Danish Research Centre on Gender Equality** has been granted funds to prepare a publication entitled *Examples of Best Practice*, which will compare Danish experience to experience gathered in Norway, Britain and Germany. The publication will compare the working methods and approaches of the countries. The publication is due out in July 2003, and more information is available at [www.celi.dk](http://www.celi.dk)

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