

**Preventing and Responding to Early and Forced Child Marriage of Iranian-Canadians in
Canada**

by

Azad Vizheh

Bachelor of Arts (Honours),
School of Criminology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY, 2016

MAJOR PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS (CRIMINAL JUSTICE)

In the
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

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UNIVERSITY OF THE FRASER VALLEY

Winter 2019

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Approval

Name: Azad Vizheh

Degree: Master of Arts (Criminal Justice) Degree

Title: Preventing and Responding to Early and Forced Marriage of Iranian-Canadians in and outside Canada

Examining Committee

Name: Dr. Amanda McCormick

GPC Chair

Director, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Name: Professor Yvon Dandurand

Senior Supervisor

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Name: Dr. Hayli Millar

Co-Supervisor

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Name:

External Examiner

Title

University or Company

Date Defended/Approved: _____

Abstract

The United Nations General Assembly (2017) and the Committee on the Rights of the Child on its General comment No. 13 (2011) recognize early and forced child marriage (EFCM) as a harmful practice and a form of violence against children. They are deeply concerned by multiple potentially long-lasting effects of EFCM on the children's physical, emotional, and psychological health and development. The present qualitative study, based on 16 interviews with members of the Iranian-Canadian community, examines the participants' opinions and perceptions on EFCM as a basis for identifying prevention measures to address the problem of EFCM within that community. The results of this study revealed that EFCM among that segment of the Iranian-Canadian community is linked to the strict compliance with cultural and religious customs and norms, protection of collective morality, honour, and reputation of a family, as well as parents' fear and insecurity for the future of their children and their consideration of the potential socioeconomic benefits derived from the marriage. All participants acknowledged that EFCM may result in long-lasting harmful effects on the development, safety, and health of children, especially girls. They also acknowledged the need for discussing, preventing, and responding to EFCM by improving support services for the victims and encouraging them to report violence and seek help in Canada. Finally, many participants believed that there is a need to develop culturally appropriate and relevant interventions and engage the community's cultural and religious leaders in challenging the social norms, mentalities and attitudes that continue to tolerate or condone EFCM within the Iranian-Canadian community.

Keywords: Child marriage; early marriage, forced marriage of child; EFCM; harmful traditional practice; violence against children; culturally relevant intervention; preventive measures

Acknowledgements

I could not have completed this major project without the patience and support of several individuals and agencies. First, I express sincere appreciation to both of my supervisors, Professor Yvon Dandurand and Dr. Hayli Millar for their ongoing support and guidance. I deeply appreciate their constructive feedback throughout this academic project and would not have been able to succeed in this academic endeavor without their efforts and encouragement. I also want to thank my fellow cohort members in the 2016 M.A. in Criminal Justice program for supporting and encouraging me throughout the duration of the project.

My appreciation also goes to my both brothers and my family for their support and understanding, I would not have been able to succeed and pursue my passion for learning about harmful traditional practices.

Finally, my sincerest thanks go out to two agencies, Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC) and North Shore Multicultural Society, for assisting me with the recruitment of participants for my theiss project. I am truly grateful for all their help with this project.

Dedication

To my family and to all those who stand against harmful traditional practices that harm children.

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List of acronyms

1. CEDAW: The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
2. CRC: The Convention on the Rights of the Child
3. EFCM: Early and Forced Child Marriage
4. ILO: International Labour Organization
5. IPPF: International Planned Parenthood Federation
6. MOSAIC: Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities
7. SALCO: South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario
8. United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)
9. UN: United Nations
10. UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund
11. UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
12. WFF: Walk Free Foundation

Chapter 1. Introduction

Although forced marriage of minors is a serious violations of children's fundamental human rights and a form of child abuse (Kopelman, 2016), many States still struggle to develop effective strategies to prevent and respond to EFCM (Nahamya, 2017; Timmerman, 2015). Marriage without the free and full expressed consent of one or both parties is denounced by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948)¹ (article 16) the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (1979) (article 16), and the *Convention on Consent, Minimum Age of Marriage and Registration of Marriages* (1962) (Article 1). These conventions apply to both children and adults. The definition of an "early marriage" in international human rights law, however, is a little less precise. None of the previously named conventions sets a minimum age of marriage. They only require States to specify the minimum age of marriage in domestic legislation and ensure that all the marriages are officially registered. Warria (2017) writes that although the convention does not contain provision determining or specifying the actual minimum age for marriage, the Committee recommends recommended that countries increase the minimum age for marriage with or without parental consent to 18 years for both boys and girls (p. 277).

Similarly, in 2017, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Declaration which denounced EFCM in the strongest possible terms, but stopped short of setting a minimum age for marriage. This declaration recommends that the States to enact and enforce policies or legislation that sets a minimum age of marriage and amend laws that allows marriages below the minimum

¹ The first international consensus document recognizing that "marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending parties" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948*).

age of marriage and majority (United Nations General Assembly, 2017, p. 4). It also calls upon the States to ensure that “the marriage is entered into only with the informed, free and full consent of the intending spouses” (p. 3). Finally, it recommends that the States should make it easier for individuals, especially those living in rural and marginalized to register their births and marriages in a timely manner without facing any barriers (p. 4). For its part, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 13 (2011) recognizes the forced marriage of children as a form of sexual abuse and exploitation of children; recognizes that children become subject of various forms of violence through harmful practices, such as early and forced marriage of children; acknowledges that a child has the rights to be free from all forms of violence; and finally recommends that the States should take all the actions to protect children from harmful traditional practices, such as EFCM (p. 11).

In this research, I will first give a brief overview of the problem statement, rationale for and objectives of this study and then discuss the concept of consent involved in early and forced child marriage (EFCM) as well as complexities around the definition of a child, globally. This will be followed by a review of the literature, which is based on the perceptions of researchers and several national and international reports on the practice child marriage and forced marriage, separately or together. Then, it will follow the presentation of the research questions addressed in the study, the method utilized, and the research findings. The major project will conclude with a discussion of the interview findings and the formulation of a few recommendations. Finally, the paper will provide recommendations for practice.

Issue/Problem Statement

My qualitative study examined EFCM among adult members of the Iranian-Canadian community in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia, through 16 face-to-face interviews

conducted from early November to late December 2017. In this research, some of the most relevant definitions in this study include a definition of a child, child marriage, early child marriage, and forced child marriage, as well as EFCM. A child refers to any person under the age of 18, in accordance with the CRC's general definition adopted in 1989 (Article 1). A child marriage refers to marriage of person under the age of 18 years of age, based on the UN CRC convention. UNICEF also uses the CRC's definition of child marriage. Early child marriage refers to a marriage of a person under the legal age of marriage as in Canada, early child marriage refers to the marriage of a person under the age of 16 (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 293.2*). Forced child marriage refers to a marriage of a person coerced by force or other means (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 293.1*).

Finally, early and forced child marriage (EFCM) refers to either early or forced marriage of children in a formal marital union. It is also crucial to discuss how early marriage and forced child marriage are linked and relevant to EFCM. However, both early marriage and forced child marriage are subject to varying interpretations. For the purpose of the study, I chose a definition of "EFCM" in this research in order to simplify a definition that involves both early marriage or forced marriage of children. In other words, "EFCM" in this study involves the marriage, including either early and forced involving children. I personally did not separate early child marriage from forced child marriage because I genuinely believe and will argue throughout the paper that most early child marriage involves some degree of coercion/duress or force. The concept of forced marriage sends us back to the question of consent to marry and in the case of children, this raises the question of whether children can truly consent. The question of age is also complex because at this point, it refers to an age define by national law, in Canada it is the

age of sixteen, and national laws are subject to change. Both the concepts of consent and age of child will be discussed in following sections.

Rationale for this Research Study

This research was initiated for several reasons, including a personal reason. First, my interest in researching EFCM was prompted by an event 16 years ago in Iranian Kurdistan. In 2002, a fight between two tribes due to some unresolved issues resulted in serious bodily harm to a member of my tribe. After several meetings between local elders from both tribes, a compromise was reached to end the dispute. This agreement involved the marriage of a boy (11 years old) from my tribe to a girl (9 years of age) from the other tribe. At that time, it felt like a solution to the ongoing conflict. During this event, I witnessed the pain and agony of the two children involved in the marriage. Nonetheless, nobody, including myself, stood up against that practice. This event began my interest in understanding EFCM.

Other reason is that Canada is a home of thousands (125,825) Iranians with Canadian and non-Canadian citizenship (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Importantly, Iran is a place where child marriage and forced marriage of children is legally and social tolerated (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006; Tremayne, 2006; UNICEF, 2018). I make note of Iranian laws here because Iranian laws may reflect and support cultural and religious beliefs and social norms that promote and tolerate EFCM among some Iranian migrants. Also, some members of the Iranian-Canadian community can still go to Iran or elsewhere for the purpose of concluding an early or forced child marriage in that country as a way to circumvent Canadian laws or avoid legal consequences in Canada. The last reason is that this study examines the perceptions of Iranian-Canadians on the practice of EFCM, which is legal in Iran, but entirely illegal in Canada.

Finally, this study was developed from my previous honours thesis project, which examined ‘honour’ killings through six face-to-face interviews with leaders of different religious and cultural communities and law enforcement officials in Canada. Results from my previous study revealed that honour killing is a very complex issue among members of honour-based² cultural communities and that the phenomenon is carried out based on multiple social, cultural, religious, and legal factors around the world. The results of my honour’ thesis project suggest that in order to effectively respond to honour killings in Canada, there is need for a proactive and collaborative approach between various governmental and non-governmental agencies, including the community. This was a conclusion to which others had also come, (e.g., Svevo-Cianci, Herczog, Krappmann, & Cook, 2011). It is also reflected in the Model Strategies on the Elimination of Violence against children in the Fields of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (United Nations General Assembly, 2014).

Purpose/Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this exploratory study was to examine participants’ opinions and perspectives on EFCM within their community. The study also aimed to understand what some members of the Iranian-Canadian community would consider as culturally appropriate

² Honour-based community, such as Kurdish community refers to a community in which the honour and reputation of a family and community as a whole is highly valued and protected within a cultural and religious community. Anyone who is accused of violating such an honour and reputation of a family, can become the subject of violence and punishment (Hague et al., 2013). According to Ouis (2009), “the honour ideology is definitely a fundamental cultural trait determining gender roles in several countries in the Mediterranean region as well as in parts of the Middle East and Asia” (p. 452). Importantly, “in honour-based culture, the attribution of blame for sexual assault and rape is on the *victim*, not the off ender” (p. 452). “The relationship between Islam an honour ideology needs to be clarified from the start: Not all honour cultures are Muslim—honour ideology is found among Christians and Hindus, as well as other religions—and not all Muslim cultures adhere to the honour ideology” (Ouis, 2009, p. 453).

forms of interventions to prevent EFCM in their community. This study explored the following questions:

1. Do members of the Iranian-Canadian community understand some of the contributing factors of EFCM in their community?
2. Do members of the Iranian-Canadian community acknowledge that there is a need to prevent and respond to EFCM in Canada?
3. Are members of the Iranian-Canadian community willing to confront or take action against EFCM through education and prevention? If yes, how?

This study also considered some related issues, including: how do members of the Iranian-Canadians define a “child” for the purpose of child marriage? Which practices or behaviours do they consider as EFCM? In their opinion, what social, cultural, religious, and legal factors contribute to EFCM and, to what extent? What do they understand to be the negative effects of EFCM? And, finally, what would they suggest could be done to prevent and respond to EFCM within their own community, whether the marriage itself takes place in Canada or in another country?

Understanding Consent Involving in EFCM

The concept of consent involving in EFCM is very important and at the same time complex, especially when it involves children. In an article demonstrating forced child marriage as a form of child trafficking, Warria (2017) argues that in most incidents of early and forced child marriage, the consent of children should not legally be valid for several reasons (p. 275). First, younger children (under the age of 18) are more likely to be in weak positions where “they are not well informed on marriages and are subsequently less likely to give free, full and informed consent (p. 275). Second, children often are not consulted at all and their consent is

deferred to their parents (p. 276). Young children also are in capable of understanding the consequences and implications of their decision to consent for marriage (p. 275). Importantly, “children lack autonomy, independence, and the maturity,” all of which are required to consent to marriage (p. 275). Finally, in most forced child marriages, the child is forced into a marriage without her consent (p. 276).

It is also supported in two other articles that the nature of child’s consent for marriage is questionable because of the power imbalances between the children and their family members, such as the father (Ertem et al., 2008; Sapoznik Evans, 2017). Also, in a publication that was conducted by ILO & WFF (2017), it is highlighted that “a person might be forced to marry through physical, emotional, or financial duress, deception by family members, the spouse, or others, or the use of force, threats, or severe pressure” (p. 17). The word “person” in this quote can apply to both adults and children. It is important to note that early child marriage and forced child marriage can occur together or separately. Similarly, Kopelman (2016) suggests that the lack of consent for marriage including both those who do not give consent to the marriage because they are against it, and those who cannot give consent because they are too young, disabled, or otherwise incapable of giving informed, competent and voluntary authorization to a marriage contract (p. 174). Therefore, minors cannot authorize the contract of marriage because they are not mature enough to understand their situation and obligations (p. 174). Finally, the consent of a child might be entirely lacking or influencing “due to coercion, misinformation, deception, fraud or lies (p. 174).

Importantly, I believe that the consent of a child involving EFCM is based on several key conditions. Child may consensually marry another person without any duress, coercion, and/or force and this is early child marriage or marriage under the age of 16. Nevertheless, I argue that

although a child may consent to a marriage, but his or her consent might be influenced or coerced by factors, such as individuals' cultural and religious values, expectations, and norms, power dynamics as well as the age and maturity of children. Therefore, I further argue the consent of a child in the situation of early child marriage should not be valid because an immature child (under the age of 16) is incapable of expressing informed consent and understanding the consequences of marriage and consent to the marriage. All of these notions were supported by several researchers (Sapoznik Evans, 2017; Mutyaba, 2011; Nahamya, 2017).

On the other hand, in a situation of forced child marriage, consent of a child is entirely ignored and not required by the parents. These notions are supported by two researchers (Nahamya, 2017; Warria, 2017). Anis et al., (2013) report that the lack of consent is a distinguishing factor in forced marriage situations involving adults and children (p. 4). The final message is that according to Nahamya (2017), early child marriage is forced child marriage or a form of forced child marriage. The main reason is that the consent of a child under the age of 16 is nullified by the age and maturity of a child, and power dynamics, as well as the child's father's whose decision for marriage is influenced by his cultural and religious values, expectations, and norms. I totally agree with Nahamya (2017) and believe that early child marriage is a form of forced child marriage, especially indirect one.

As a researcher, I want to notify that that I did not clarify any of these concepts for the participants in this study and thus they interpreted these concepts on their own. Nevertheless, I did clarify the definition of child marriage based on the Canadian laws.

The Complexities around the Definitions of the Age of Child

Similar to the concept of consent discussed in the previous section, the question of age, involving EFCM, is relevant, but complex since it varies across cultures and communities and a

subject to change under both the national laws and international conventions. According to Article 1 in the UN's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (1989), a child is "every human being below the age of eighteen unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (CRC, 2011). Although this UN convention defines a child as a person under the age of 18, it suggests that a particular State can define it differently if they wish (CRC, 2011). This allows many States, including Canada, to set or permit the minimum age of marriage below the 18 years of age (Timmerman, 2015, p. 3). Also, States or countries are not entirely obligated to comply with the UN definitions or standards.

For example, both Canada and Iran (according to the Article 1208 of the *Iranian Civil Code*) (Persia Educational Foundation, 2017) have a different minimum age for marriage although in both countries, a child refers to a person under the age of 18, which is also the age of majority, with an exception that each Canadian province, including British Columbia, may determine the age of majority between 18 or 19 years of age and this is when a child considered to be legally an adult (Ontario Justice Education Network, [n.d]). In BC, individuals are legally permitted to marry on their own once turning nineteen, but individuals over 16 and under 19 are legally permitted to marry with the consent of parents' or guardians' (Ontario Justice Education Network, [n.d], p. 11).

In Iran, according to Article 1041 of the *Iranian Civil Code of Family/Sharia laws*, girls are legally permitted to marry at the age of 13 and boys at 15 (Tremayne, 2006). This was raised from 9 to 13 years of age for girls and from 13 to 15 years of age for boys since 2003 (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006; Tremayne, 2006). Nevertheless, Iranian children living in rural and marginalized traditional communities are still permitted to marry below the legal minimum age of marriage based on religious and customary laws and parental or judicial consent

(Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006, p. 114; Tremayne, 2006, p. 71). Whereas in Canada, although prior to 2015, it was possible for Canadian children under the age of 16 to legally marry based on parents' consent or court's order in some jurisdictions (Sapoznik Evans, 2017), the Canadian federal government established the absolute and uniform minimum age of marriage as 16 across the country within a new legislation, *An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the Civil Marriage Act, and the Criminal Code and to make consequential amendments to other Acts*, in 2015 (S.C. 2015, C. 29).

According to Timmerman, (2015), the “lack of universally recognized appropriate minimum age standard for marriage represents a significant limitation in terms of arriving at a consensus concerning the prevalence of the child marriage globally” (p. 3). This itself create a key challenge to determine scope and extent of child marriage, globally (Timmerman, 2015; Tremayne, 2006). Warner (2004) argues that domestic laws and international conventions are inadequate for protecting children against forced marriage due to several reasons (p. 266). First, domestic laws are often unenforced under cultural and religious justifications or exceptions (p. 266). These exceptions include parental consent and/or judicial permission and religious and customary laws, which permit a child to marry below the minimum legal age for marriage (p. 266). Second, as mentioned earlier, the domestic definitions of a child and of marriage are not always accordance with international human rights standards as countries are not entirely obligated to comply with the UN standards (Tremayne, 2006; Warner, 2004). All of this results in disconnection between international and domestic laws and challenges for effectively responding to harmful practice of EFCM (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006; Tremayne, 2006; Warner, 2004).

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The Prevalence of EFCM, Globally and Nationally

The Global Prevalence of EFCM

EFCM is a global concern affecting many children and mainly girls from various ages and cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, especially in developing countries (UNICEF & Government of Canada, 2017; UNICEF, 2018), despite of national and international legislations and efforts by various governmental- and non-governmental agencies and civil activists (Warria, 2017). More specifically, one in six adolescent girls between the age of 15 and 19 are currently married or in some form of union (UNICEF, 2018). Also, it was estimated that more than 700 million women get married before 18 years of age and about 20 million entered into a marital union before they turned fifteen (UNICEF, 2014b, p. 25). Nevertheless, girls living in poor and marginalized communities, located in South Asia, Middle East, and North-and sub-Saharan Africa, are 2.5 times more likely to marry during their childhood compared to girls from wealthier regions (UNICEF, 2014a, p. 3). The main reason is that young girls are treated as a form of property or economic resource for families in these communities (IPPF, 2006; UNICEF, 2018). According to a recent UNICEF report, child marriage is most prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa where about four in ten females are married before their 18th birthday, and around one in eight females are married before 15 years of age (UNICEF, 2018). It is important to note that statistics on the prevalence of EFCM can be problematic or misrepresented because in some instances, there is a lack of formal mandatory birth and marriage registration (Warria, 2017, p. 275). In other words, the registration of birth and marriage, including child marriage, are not compulsory in many countries (Warria, 2017).

The Prevalence of EFCM in Canada

So far, two studies have been conducted on the practice of forced marriage in Canada. One study employed semi-structured interviews with 16 frontline service providers who deal with this issue (8 in Montréal and 8 in Toronto) in Canada (Bendriss, 2008). The other study, which was conducted by South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario (SALCO),³ surveyed 30 social service providers in Ontario, Canada (Anis et al, 2013, p. 5). The results of these two studies determined that forced marriage is an existing problem affecting young Canadians, mainly young women and girls, from all ages and various religious and ethnic backgrounds (Anis et al., 2013; Bendriss, 2008). Both studies revealed that the situations of forced marriage involve immigrant families, who came mainly from South Asia, the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa (Anis et al., 2013, p. 22; Bendriss, 2008, p. 5). Bendriss (2008) reports that forced marriage “exists in Canadian society, but the extent is not yet known” (p. 1). The results of both studies revealed that forced marriage affects those who were born in Canada and those who were born outside Canada and come to Canada by themselves or with their families (Anis et al., 2013, p. 21; Bendriss, 2008, p. 5). Finally, the results of these two studies revealed that the victims of forced marriage are often taken outside the country, such as Canada, where the victim was born or was living (Anis et al., 2013, p. 22; Bendriss, 2008, p. 5). One key implication based on the findings of both studies is that forced marriage could occur in or outside Canada. Both Canadian studies provided limited information on the problem of forced marriage in Canada and their findings are not readily applicable to the rest of Canada. Both studies primarily focused on

³ SALCO which is a non-profit legal aid clinic that was first established in 1999 serving low-income South Asians and providing them with access to justice in the Greater Toronto Area. “SALCO first started receiving calls forced marriage (“FM”) clients in 2005” (Anis et al., 2013)

forced marriage, which can be applied to both children and adults, and thus did not provide much information on EFCM in Canada.

Understanding Early or Forced Child Marriage

Child marriage refers to any legal or customary marriage or union of a child under the age of 18, that is being the minimum legal age of marriage and the age of majority set by a particular country, (Warria, 2017), in accordance to article 1 of *the Convention on the Rights of the child*. In other words, this involves either one or both spouses being children (under the age of 18). This definition is also considered by both the UNICEF and UNFPA. Child marriage may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious or customary laws (IPFF, 2006). Although the word “marriage” is not considered directly in the Convention, child marriage is linked to other fundamental rights, such as right to be free from all form of violence and harmful traditional practices as well as right to freely and fully express their views and consent, all of which addressed by the Committee as well. It is generally accepted that forced marriage refers to a formal martial union where one or both of the parties, regardless of their age, are forced to marry another person against their will and thus there is no valid consent obtained in forced marriage. Rather, some form of coercion and/or duress have been used to bring about the marriage (Anis et al., 2013; Gill & Engeland, 2014; Nahamya, 2017). This may be physical and/or emotional (e.g. emotional pressure, threats or psychological abuse) (Gill & Engeland, 2014, p. 242), or financial duress and deception, or a combination of the two or more, by family members, the spouse, or others (ILO & WFF, 2017, p. 17; Sapoznik Evans 2017, p. 52). Both the UN and Council of Europe recognizes forced marriage as a marriage without the free and full consent of the intended spouses. Bendriss (2008) reports that “a whole range of pressure tactics,

from emotional blackmail to death threats” are used by the parents in order to convince or force their children to marry another person (p. 17).

According to Nahamya (2017), child marriage has two categories: one refers to the marriage of those under the age of 18 and the other is the marriage of those under the age of 15 (p. 114). Child marriage is generally considered to be forced marriage or a form of forced marriage because children, especially those under the age of 15, either cannot make informed decision about marriage, or their decision is influenced by their parent or family (Nahamya, 2017, p. 113) and have not expressed full, free, and informed consent (ILO & WFF, 2017, p. 17). For example, deception is when children are told by their family members that they are going to another country for a vacation, but children find out that they are going to get married there (Kopelman, 2016, p. 175). Within the context of the law in Canada, EFCM does not have a concrete definition in Canada, but child marriage and forced marriage separately are defined under the Canadian laws (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 293.1 & 2*). It is important to note that the definition of CEFM often vary depending on how the abbreviation is used. For the purpose of this paper, EFCM refers to both early and forced child marriage, mainly girls since girls are more likely to become subject of EFCM than boys.

Challenges Related with Responding to EFCM and its Associated Forms of Violence

Effectively responding to child marriage, which has been practiced among various communities for many years, is one of the greatest challenges facing individuals around the globe, (Nahamya, 2017) due to social norms and attitudes as well as legal tolerance towards this practice (Arthur et al., 2018, p. 57). Mutyaba (2011) reports that early marriage of girls is deeply embedded by both culture and religion in many African countries (p. 339). Similarly, Ertem et al. (2008) also states that early and forced marriage of young girls are supported by both cultural

and religious practices alongside social pressure in Eastern Turkey (p. 229), where many Kurdish and Arabic girls living in traditional and poor Muslim communities become subject of this practice (marriage before the age of 16) (p. 237). In traditional⁴ societies, the husband has power and authority over family members to not only make all the decisions, including decision for child marriage, for the household, but also has the vested rights to punish family members accused of immoral and inappropriate behaviours (Svevo-Cianci et al., 2011, p. 982). Early and forced marriage of young girls are mainly carried out to control the social and sexual life of girls within certain cultural and religious communities (Alinia, 2013; Ouis, 2009).

It was supported in two pieces of Canadian literatures that forced marriage can be performed inside or outside Canada, regardless of its legal or illegal status (Anis et al., 2013; Bendriss, 2008) and the parents and the couple might decide not to officially register and report it until both partners are adults, especially if they know that registration of the marriage can have legal consequences for them (Hester et al., 2007). Another key challenge specifically with respect to the practice of forced marriage is that since forced marriage is a crime in Canadian society, it is most likely to occur in the closed environment of the family or community; therefore, forced marriage victims tend to keep their situations secret to avoid disgracing and troubling their families (Bendriss, 2008, p. 39). This secrecy results in forced marriage incidents being unreported (p. 39).

Importantly, it was highlighted by many researchers that victims, including both children and women, living in religious and cultural communities from the Middle East as well as South

⁴ Traditional family refers to a family in which members are usually poor and marginalized, less educated, and more conservative with complying and conforming with cultural and religious norms, customs, and practices (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006). And, traditional societies are those societies in which the father makes all the decisions for the household and is granted power and authority to punish family members who fails to obey the codes of honour and expectations of the family (Svevo-Cianci et al, 2011, p. 982).

Asia, are less likely to seek help and report interpersonal violence against them for a variety of reasons, due to fear, shame, social stigma, lack of knowledge, language barriers, as well as compliance with cultural and religious expectations and norms (Abu-Ras, 2007; Ahmed et al., 2009; Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Gill & Harrison, 2016). Sapoznik Evans (2017) also highlights that forced marriage victims are extremely reluctant to report violence committed against them at the hand of their loved ones (i.e., their parents or family members) and seek help due to fear of putting their loved ones in trouble as well as being judged and ostracised by the public as well as their family members (p. 68). Also, reporting violence to the police or others outside of the family is often considered a serious violation of a family's expectations and norms, especially in cultures that give preference to the private settlement of disputes as a way to circumvent family dishonour and embarrassment within their community (Cooney, 2014; Gill & Harrison, 2016; Nahamya, 2017; Roberts et al., 2014). It is often difficult for victims of child marriage, especially females, to report violence committed against them due to the age and gender vulnerabilities as well as lack of power and capabilities (Nasrullah et al., 2014a).

Finally, Kopelman (2016) states that it is hard for governments to protect minors against forced marriage, especially when parents decide to take their children to another place to perform early and forced marriage (p. 173). This challenge was also discussed in a Canadian study (Anis et al., 2013). All of these challenges make it very difficult for professionals and government officials to fully understand and effectively respond to this harmful cultural practice (Bendriss, 2008) and very challenging for the victims to leave their abusive relationships, (Sapoznik Evans, 2017), and importantly, report violence against them (Gill & Harrison, 2016). One key implication based on the above perceptions is that early and forced marriage of young girls is more likely occur in the environment of the family and outside legal system and those, including

children, who experience violence, are less likely to report violence; and thus, this creates serious concerns and challenges for the government officials to effectively respond to EFCM (Nahamya, 2017). Another key implication is that the State officials need to develop strategies that improves the victims, especially children' chances for reporting violence confidently and safely and provide adequate support services for the victims in their community (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p. 13).

Contributing Factors Leading to EFCM

In order to fully and truly understand the forces driving child marriages, determining the role of social dynamics and cultural customs and norms that condone and tolerate child marriages is very crucial (Nahamya, 2017, p. 115). Reasons behind the practice of child marriage may vary from one country to another (Birech, 2013); nevertheless, it was discussed by many researchers throughout the review of literatures, socioeconomic factors alongside culture, more specifically, cultural customs and social norms, are the most drivers of child marriage in many communities around the world (IPFF, 2006; Kopelman, 2016; Nahamya, 2017; UNFPA-UNICEF, 2017). More specifically, Birech (2013) states that poverty, which is also related to culture plays a significant role in child marriage (p. 98). In poor and marginalized communities, girls are often seen as economic burden by the family and community members and thus, marriage is seen as an economic transaction (Birech, 2013, p. 98) or an economic coping strategy in order to improve and strengthen the family and children' social and financial status and reduce costs of raising daughters in many communities around the world (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2006, p. 18; Mutyaba, 2011). Kopelman (2016) reports that families might sacrifice the life and interests of one child in order to secure and improve the social and financial status of other family members. Although parents may understand that child marriage

may put their child at risk of coerced sexual intercourse and early pregnancy, they may believe that the marriage will secure the future of their children and; thus, parents believe that they are acting on the best interests of their children (Kopelman, 2016, p. 174). A father may also agree to the marriage of his daughter as an agreement or bargain for erasing the family's debt and strengthening the families' ties (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006; Bendriss, 2008; Sapoznik Evans, 2017). The final socioeconomic factor refers to a desire for bypassing immigration rules by the parents and children (Hester et al. 2007, p. 36; Timmerman, 2015, p. 4). For example, when a family or a child does not have secure immigration status, they may accept marriage in order to gain proper immigration status or a visa as a foreign national (Heiman et al., 2011).

For example, a bride exchange or "jin-bi-jin" (Alinia, 2013) or "berdel"⁵ is a form of cultural practice or custom that practiced among some members of Kurdish communities (Ertem et al., 2008). This customary practice refers to a situation in which two families, not necessarily poor, decide to exchange their daughters for their sons through marriage to reduce the costs of weddings on both sides (Alinia, 2013, p. 93). Two other researchers highlight that girls are often treated as a key source for family wealth, especially for those families who rely on a bride price⁶ (Mutyaba, 2011; Warner, 2004) or dowries⁷ for the marriage of their daughters (Sapoznik Evans, 2017; Warner, 2004). Birech (2013) writes that bride price decreases as girls get older and thus this encourages parents to marry off their daughters as fast as possible (p. 98).

Second, EFCM is carried out by parents as compliance with cultural and religious norms and customs (Kopelman, 2016) whereby EFCM is practiced as a religious and/or cultural custom

⁵ Jin-bi-jin" or berdel is a Kurdish phrase translated into "bride exchange" (Alinia, 2013; Ertem et al., 2008).

⁶ "A sum of money or quantity of goods given to a bride's family by that of the groom in some tribal societies" (Oxford Definition, [n.d]).

⁷ An amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage. (Oxford Definition, [n.d]).

in many communities around the globe (International NGO Council on Violence Against Children, 2016). According to Kopelman (2016), forced marriage is a part of a cultural heritage in many communities in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, (p. 174). This often happens as soon as the child reaches puberty and as long as the consent of the parents or court is obtained (Asli & Byouki, 2016, p. 735; Kopelman, 2016). Religious and cultural customs, as key aspects of a cultural or religious community, refer to formal and/or informal actions or practices that certain community members have been practicing for many years (Mutyaba, 2011, p. 345). According to Kouyaté (2009), legal or formal local customs are tools that are enacted by the traditional local and religious leaders and are based on conventions within a particular community (p. 5). These customs are often more appropriate, efficient, easily accepted, and respected than written legislations or laws by members of a community since they are “based on a deeper knowledge and consideration of the historic and cultural background of communities” (p. 5). Arthur et al. (2017) further support that customary and religious laws either do not set a minimum age of marriage or establish a requirement that is lower than civil law provisions (p. 57). Warner (2004) further adds that cultural and/or religious customary rules set the minimum age of marriage for a child based on parental or guardians’ consent (p. 244). One key implication is that the EFCM is based on the parents’ compliance with cultural, religious, and social norms. Another important implication is forced marriage of children has been carried out for many years and will likely to continue if they do not get circumvented (Ertem et al., 2008).

Parents’ perceptions and beliefs that child marriage is in the best interests of the child, not just financially, but also socially, culturally, and religiously, also plays a role in child marriage (Cooney, 2014; Kopelman, 2016; Warria, 2017). According to Ouis (2009), many Middle Eastern parents often force their children into early child marriage “as a mean of protecting them

[their children]” (p. 449). Parents believe that child marriage will prevent their children from engaging in any perceived social or sexual misconducts that may result in shame or embarrassment for the family within a community (Bendriss, 2008). Perceptions of insecurity and fear by parents mainly exist among members of honour-based cultural communities in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia (Kopelman, 2016, p. 174). In Middle Eastern communities, the protection of honour and reputation of a family is highly valued and necessary (Bond, 2012). The husband is a head of the family and defender of the family’s honour within honour-based societies (Gill & Harrison, 2016, p. 450). At the same time, violations of honour have serious repercussions, such as violence and punishment for the transgressors among members of Kurdish cultural communities (Hague, Gill, & Begikhanian, 2013).

The marriage of a child is more likely to happen if a girl gets pregnant as a result of consensual or non-consensual sex (Alinia, 2013, p. 93). When this happens, a family forces the daughter to marry the father of the child (Hague et al., 2013, p. 384). Birech (2013) also explains that girls’ virginity also plays a role in perpetuation of early child marriage (p. 98). Virginity is highly valued, but the loss of it results in shame and embarrassment for the family and girls in many African communities (Birech, 2013, p. 98). Therefore, in order to protect and preserve girls’ virginity, parents tend to marry off their daughters at a very young age (p. 98). The loss of virginity (Birech, 2013), premarital sex, and pregnancies out of marriage are deemed socially and religiously immoral and are treated as serious violations to a family’s and community’s expectations, norms and moral code (Cooney, 2014; Idriss, 2015).

Conversely, non-compliance with cultural and religious expectations and norms can have serious social and economic repercussions for the family’s overall status (Bond, 2012). For example, a non-compliant family might be excluded and ostracized by other community

members (Kirti et al., 2011). As a result, the parents' decisions for marriage of their children is also influenced by fear of social and community pressures and repercussions (Shirdwadkar, 2016, p. 882). Ertem et al. (2008) also highlight that women and young girls in Eastern Turkey are socially coerced or pressured to accept early, forced, and arranged marriages, all of which supported by cultural and religious practices (p. 229). Overall, forced marriage of minor can also be used as a way to comply with traditional norms, defend the family' honour, erase debts, avoid the costs of raising children, as well as ensuring that the children do not engage in sexual relationships before marriage (Kopelman, 2016, p. 174).

Finally, the lack of appropriate legal action is another reason behind EFCM across the globe (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). In a systematic review and analysis of legislation and laws adopted by 191 UN member states between 1995 and 2013, Arthur et al. (2018) concluded that there were widespread gender discriminatory provisions regulating the minimum age of marriage for girls (p. 66). It was observed that in 59 of these states, girls were legally allowed to marry below the legal minimum age of marriage with parental consent; in 23 states, girls were legally permitted to marry below the age of 18 without requiring any special permission; in 99 states, girls were legally permitted to marry below 18 years of age based on parental consent; and, in 30 states girls were allowed to marry below the age of 18 based on customary and religious statutory laws. The review also revealed that eight states did not have a national minimum legal age for marriage. Lastly, when legal exceptions such as parental permission and customary and religious laws were taken into consideration, 104 states still legally permit individuals to marry under 18 years of age (Arthur et al., 2018, p. 67).

Adverse, Long-lasting Consequences of EFCM

Many researchers highlight that EFCM, as serious violations of children's fundamental human rights, undermines or threatens all aspects of children's health and safety and reduce their opportunities from fulfilling their potential (IPPF, 2006; Kopelman, 2016). Early or forced marriage of children can put an immature or undeveloped child at a high risk of coerced sexual intercourse or rape, which is not a crime within marriage in many countries around the globe (International NGO Council on Violence Against Children, 2016, p. 28). Although EFCM victims experience daily sexual, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of their husbands, they attempt to cope with abuse in isolation (International NGO Council on Violence Against Children, 2016; IPPF, 2006). Such social and psychological isolation cuts a child off from available support services within a community and reduces their chances of reporting violence and seeking help to resolve adverse health and emotional concerns, such as stress, depression, and anxiety (International NGO Council on Violence Against Children, 2016; IPPF, 2006; UNICEF, 2014a; 2014b). According to Arthur et al. (2018), child brides are often married to much older men (p. 52). Therefore, power differences related to the age disparities strip young girls' abilities to negotiate for safer sex, sexuality, and reproductive health or fertility (Arthur et al. 2018; UNICEF, 2014a & b; Timmerman, 2015). The results of two studies, which examined whether child marriage (under the age of 18) puts adolescent married brides at a risk of violence, one of which conducted in 2006 in India and the other conducted in 2013 in Pakistan, confirmed that individuals who marry as a child are more likely to experience or expose interpersonal violence than those who marry as adults (Nasrullah et al, 2014a; Raj et al., 2010).

Young brides are more likely to get pregnant in their childhood and to die during childbirth due to the lack of physical development (Kouyaté, 2009; UNFPA-UNICEF, 2017).

Also, those who survive the delivery are more likely to end up with obstetric fistula⁸ (Mutyaba, 2011, p. 348), which is very common among young girls who are physically immature for having children or giving birth (UNICEF, Early Marriages: Child Spouses, 2001). “Child marriage often results in the early sexualization of girls, whose bodies may be unprepared for childbirth or have not yet reached their sexual maturity” (Timmerman, 2015, p. 2). Also, child brides end up having many children, all of whom they have to take care of while they themselves are still very young (Ertem et al., 2008, p. 230; UNICEF, 2014b, p. 27). Once a young girl is married, she is less likely to divorce (Alinia, 2013) and escape the marital abuse (Reddy, 2008); if she attempts to escape, she is more likely to become a subject of punishment or abuse at the hands of her husband and family members (Alinia, 2013; Hague et al., 2013). After marriage, child brides are no longer assumed to be a child; instead, they are treated and expected to act and behave like an adult married woman (UNICEF, 2018; Warner, 2004). This means that the role of ‘young child bride’ shifts to ‘married woman or wife’ virtually overnight (Warner, 2004).

Examining Nexus between Culture and Harmful Traditional Practices, (e.g: EFCM)

Across the literature review, arguments regarding whether culture has a role in violence; if so, whether those harmful aspects of culture are subject to change. First, the definition of culture varies across different cultures and communities (Kasturirangan et al., 2004). Birech (2013) defines culture as a way of life of members of a society or groups within a society. This includes the way people dress, speak a language, or interact with others. This author explains that since both culture and community are closely related or interconnected, in fact, they together

⁸ Obstetric Fistula refers to a form of abnormality between two areas of the body, such as vagina and rectum. This develops during labor and birth when the infant’s head descends into the maternal pelvis and cannot pass through since the young woman’s pelvis is too small or poorly developed, but the infant is too big and poorly positioned. This is caused by prolonged obstructed labor, which leave young girls incontinent of urine or feces or both (Fistula Care, [n.d]).

impact lives of individuals within a community, child marriage is a way of life in some community (p. 97). Also, culture represents itself as the lens through which people perceive and interpret their daily experiences and world in which they live in (Durojaye et al., 2014; Kasturirangan et al., 2004). Culture, which includes a society's shared heritage, language, food, and style of dress, is passed down from one generation to the next; it is created by people and can be changed by people (Kasturirangan et al., 2004, p. 319). According to these researchers, culture is not something that is fixed and unchangeable, rather it is developed by people and can be challenged by the people (Durojaye et al., 2014; Kasturirangan et al., 2004). I agree with the authors that some aspects of culture, such as learning about a new culture, language, and lifestyles are subject to change. Nevertheless, I argue that cultural norms, especially those that are embedded in cultural and religious values, that have been practiced for many years and passed on from one generation to another within members of a particular community are hard to change, especially if new change goes against the community's culture and religion. If cultural norms and customs are imposed on people and people are strictly expected or obligated to comply with them based on their underlying cultural and religious beliefs, it will be very challenging to change the culture of people (Durojaye et al., 2014; Reddy, 2008). However, if culture is freely chosen or selected by members of a group or community, the culture, including harmful cultural practices, can be changed, challenged, and eliminated (Kasturirangan et al., 2004; Reddy, 2008). There are two important interpretations based on above evidence from the literature. One is that culture is freely chosen and learned by members of a particular community and thus it can easily be changed and challenged, especially its harmful aspects; the second interpretation is that culture, including harmful practices, is imposed on people and people must comply with it and thus this is when it will be very challenging to change culture. One key

implication is that there is a need for engaging community leaders in changing those values, especially harmful practices.

Similarly, in an article that examines honour-based violence/killing, Gill and Brah (2014) suggests that in order to understand culture, it is important to address a wide range of experiences, lifestyles, as well as “values, customs and traditions of relevant social formations (p. 79). Culture is a shared psychosocial phenomenon that represents intersectionality of “gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion” and other relevant social formation or axes of differentiation (p. 79). Culture is not carried like a baggage by immigrants; rather, immigrants tend to negotiate between various aspects of their culture of origin and the new culture. Therefore, immigrants, including their children, are socialized into a new culture, but at the same time are influenced by their cultural customs, values, and traditions (Gill & Brah, 2014, p. 79). These authors argue that it is very crucial to challenge and acknowledge harmful cultural values, but this needs to be done in a way that culture of a particular community as a whole is not condemned for specific practices (p. 84). This is only possible when instead of focusing purely on the role of culture, intersection of culture with gender, social status, ethnicity, and other axes of differentiation are explored (p. 84). At the same time, it is equally important for those, such as the police, who responsible for protecting the public to identify and understand risk factors associated with particular form of violence against girls and women in order to respond them effectively (p. 84).

Also, Reddy (2008) suggests that when examining the link between culture and violence within immigrant communities, it is also important to take into consideration that gender inequality and patriarchal values, such as the men’s desire for control over the social and sexual life of women. The main reason is that patriarchal values and cultural customs, especially those assigning different gender roles for men and women, play an important role in harmful practices,

such as EFCM and honour-based violence (Durojaye et al., 2014; Ouis, 2009; Reddy, 2008; Warria, 2017). This illustrates that patriarchal values are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and customs. In an article that examines the link between harmful cultural practices and gender inequality, Durojaye et al. (2014) argue that harmful cultural practices, such as son preference, wife inheritance, and burial rites, are closely linked to gender inequality. More specifically, in a plural and diverse society, such as Nigeria where gender inequality is more prevalent, harmful cultural practices are also more common (p. 6170). The main reason is that those harmful cultural practices are used as a tool to control women and young girls social and sexual life. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration that addressing gender inequality is also required and can understanding and eliminating harmful cultural practices (Durojaye et al., 2014, p. 6178).

Importantly, it is essential to determine what aspect of culture contribute to what form of violence (Phillips, 2012; Reddy, 2008). In honour-based cultures and communities, children are expected to obey their parents; otherwise, any refusal from children might put children at a risk of punishment or violence at the hands of their parents (Abu-Lughod, 2011; Phillips, 2012). This transpires because children's disobedience is deemed unacceptable and can result in shame or embarrassment for a family within a traditional community (Abu-Lughod, 2011; Gill & Brah, 2014). In a research that examines honour-based crime, Abu-Lughod (2011) states that many young girls living in Middle Eastern and South Asian cultural communities are often punished for refusing decisions (including a decision for marriage) made by their parents (p. 43). For example, young girls might become subject of honour-based violence or killing if they refuse forced marriages arranged by their parents (p. 43). The honour-based violence is carried out against young girls as punishment for their refusal and wrongdoings (Cooney, 2014). Similarly,

there may be a relationship between EFCM and suicide in honour-based traditional communities (Gill & Brah, 2014; Hague et al., 2013; Idriss, 2015) in relation to cases where young girls commit or attempt to commit suicide as an act of protest against forced marriage (Gill & Brah, 2014, p. 77; Ouis, 2009, p. 458), and/or as an escape from daily violence that they experience at the hand of their husbands or family members (Alinia, 2013, p. 125). The overall message is that there is an interconnection between harmful traditional practices, such as EFCM and honour-based violence and/or killing (Abu-Lughod, 2011; Bond, 2012; Hague et al., 2013; Idriss, 2015). One important implication is that there is a need to better understand the role of traditional norms, values and beliefs in domestic violence (Kasturirangan et al., 2004). One key reason is that many immigrants may justify or tolerate this harmful practice as a part of their cultural heritage, customs, and norms as they have been practiced for a long time and still continue (Kopelman, 2016; Mojab, 2012; Muhammad & BCPsych, 2010).

Potential Preventive Strategies or Solutions for an Effective Response to EFCM

When examining the role of culture in cultural-based violence, it is important to acknowledge cultural customs and beliefs that condone violence; nevertheless, it cannot simply be argued that all harmful traditional practices are entirely caused by an immigrant culture (Reddy, 2008). The main reason is that strictly focusing on immigrant culture as the root-causes of violence is problematic because it may lead to false assumptions promoting discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudices against members of minority groups; this in turn may result in further isolation, marginalization and stigmatization of members of minority and disadvantaged groups within the dominant culture (Reddy, 2008; Shier & Shor, 2016; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). On the other hand, ignoring cultural-based arguments, however, may result in the lack of

contextualization of harmful practices and increase the potential discrimination experienced by vulnerable members, such as women and children, within ethnic minority groups (Reddy, 2008).

According to several researchers, “mature multiculturalism” (Reddy, 2008) and “multiculturalism without culture” (Gill & Engeland, 2014) are two viable theoretical solutions or approaches for appropriately responding to or addressing violence within immigrant communities. Under both approaches, violence in any form, regardless of its cultural context, is condemned and is defined as abuse and violation of individuals, including children’s fundamental human rights (Gill & Engeland, 2014; Reddy, 2008). In other words, both approaches put the supremacy of human rights over cultural and religious justifications and excuses. Also, the focus is moved from culture to human agency. Both models tend to create a balance between respect domestic and human rights laws as well as promoting tolerance and accommodation for religious and socio-cultural differences. In other words, it ensured that cultural and religious differences are still embraced, meaning that immigrants can still benefit from multicultural policies, such as speaking whatever language they want and practicing whatever traditions they desire, as long as they do not impose any harm against anyone, including people who share membership in their particular ethnocultural communities. Both approaches do not explain harmful traditional practices as behaviours or attitudes that are fixed or necessary, but rather as something that can be challenged and changed by members of immigrant communities as long as there is partnerships and collaboration exist between the governments, non-government organizations and civil society.

However, Quek (2013) argues that multiculturalism is often blamed for promoting violence among members of disadvantaged immigrant communities. According to Quek (2013), the main reason for this is that policies, which promote absolute respect for cultural and religious

differences, can create an environment that tolerates violence against women and children (p. 613). These policies may inadvertently permit some members to carry out violence against their family members and justify it in the name of cultural and religious freedom (p. 613). Warria (2017) supports that since child marriage negatively impacts the victims, families, as well as communities, there is a need for an integrated multi-level approach that involves children, and other stakeholders, such as families, community, and governments. Nevertheless, it is important to take into consideration that what is harmful to and protective for children when examining and judging harmful traditional practices, such as EFCM (p. 278). The main reason is that “although rights of participation and protection are important, traditional values through the concept of the collective good and social acceptance are also valuable” (p. 278). In other words, while developing strategies for eliminating harmful practices, it is crucial to take into account children’s needs and their cultural and religious circumstances. This should include developing interventions that address children and families’ needs and improve their chances for accessing available support services (p. 278).

In addition to theoretical solutions, there is some support in the literature for the idea of violence against children as a result of harmful traditional practices, such as EFCM, can practically be eliminated through legislation and sensitization or advocacy at the community, national, and international levels (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009; United Nations General Assembly, 2014). In all three pieces of literatures, it is espoused that the government’s role in effectively responding to harmful practice of EFCM needs to be preventive, informative, and educational through both legislation and advocacy or sensitization (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009; United Nations General Assembly, 2014). More specifically, there is a need for a clear and comprehensive legal prohibition of all forms of violence against children. At the same time, the

States should forbid all religious and/or cultural justifications or excuses that promote or condone violence against children (United Nations General Assembly, 2014, p. 9). Lastly, legislation also includes enactments of all laws and policies that promote and protect children's fundamental human rights (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009). This strategy, in terms of implementing more aggressive and protective laws to effectively tackle and eliminate CEFM, was also supported by another researcher (Nahamya, 2017). According to Birech (2013), the full legal prohibition needs to go together with ensuring that the laws with regard to child marriage are strictly followed and enforced (p. 102). Kopelman (2016) argues that since forced marriage of minors is a form of child abuse, everyone, including "health care providers, teachers, police, judges, attorneys, child protective services personnel, have duties to prevent or stop child abuse and there must be no justifications, such as parental rights and familism, for such marriages (p. 179).

In addition to implementing actual written laws or legislation, Kouyaté (2009) further suggests that developing strong socio-communal regulations can play a key role in preventing harmful traditional practices against women and children (p. 5). One reason is that socio-communal legislation promotes and permit harmful traditional practices, such as early/forced marriages within communities, especially village communities (Kouyaté, 2009). Socio-communal legislations refer to traditional legal and local customs that are enacted by traditional local and religious leaders based on conventions within those communities. These socio-communal customs are often more appropriate, efficient, easily accepted, and more respected than written legislations or laws by members of those communities since they are based on deeper knowledge, understanding, and considerations of historic and cultural backgrounds of a particular community. Also, challenging these customs is as important as enacting and enforcing

the actual written laws within a particular community. Therefore, adopting socio-communal regulations that are based on the involvement and agreement of local and religious leaders as well as front-line workers, will play a significant role in combating against harmful practices within own communities, collectively (Kouyaté, 2009, p. 8).

In addition, according to (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009), sensitization or advocacy should involve improving public' awareness and understanding about the issue of forced marriage happening in the community and informing and educating parents and children about forced marriage, its dynamics, and its related potential risks. This also includes respecting and protecting the rights of children and women being affected by the practice of forced marriage (Kouyaté, 2009, p. 2). At the same time, advocacy should focus on improving the victims' access for seeking help and encouraging young brides to leave their abusive relationships (Bendriss, 2008, p. 33). The key implication is that the blind enforcement of the written laws or legislation is ineffective in eliminating the harmful practices, such as forced marriage within a community and thus the legislation must always be supported by sensitization and advocacy (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009).

For example, one researcher espoused that engaging both religious leaders and faith-based organizations in the process of preventing violence against children is very effective (Lai-Smith, 2016). According to (Lai-Smith, 2016), "religious leaders are, indeed, uniquely positioned to engage families and communities to address the social, moral and ethical dimensions of child exploitation" (p. 4). Another reason is that these leaders are highly respected and accepted by members of religious and cultural communities (p. 15). Also, religious leaders have significant opportunities to influence community members' attitudes, mentalities, and social norms that condone EFCM and address any injustices and social issues within their communities

through their public sermons (p. 15). At the same time, religious leaders and communities can provide potential victims of EFCM with emotional, spiritual, and physical support and care since many members may turn to these leaders for direction, guidance, and support (p. 15). All of these can be carried out within formal social structures, such as mosques, churches, temples, and schools. These social assets, which represent significant channels for communication and action, can enable religious believers to function as powerful agents of change in the protection of children and the promotion of collective well-being (p. 16). Overall, religious leaders can help to prevent and tackle violence against children by acknowledging and addressing some of the factors and dynamics that promote violence against children, raise awareness about the risk of violence against children, and by showing their public support in identifying potential perpetrators (Lai-Smith, 2016, p. 13). Bendriss (2008) also recommends the need for engaging and consulting community and religious institutions to help facilitate the process of responding to the problem of forced marriage in Canada. Those religious authorities, through public discussions and information sessions, can convey to parents and children that forced marriage is not based on any religious principle, rather it is a cultural practice (p. 38). All these changes need to be done in a way that avoids making any value judgements, stereotypes, or false assumptions about the community where forced marriage exists (p. 38).

One key implication is that in practical level, in addition to implementing aggressive and protective laws or legislation, there is need to take into account the role of community, more specifically engaging religious and traditional leaders and service providers, in eliminating harmful practice of EFCM (Nahamya, 2017). Several researchers espoused that community-based interventions, such as community mobilization are crucial strategies for promoting sustainable social change, more specifically changing and challenging norms, behaviours, and

attitudes that condone harmful practices (Birech, 2013; Timmerman, 2015; Warria, 2017). Nevertheless, Warner (2004) highlights that changing someone's tolerance and beliefs towards violence is not straightforward, especially if an intervention goes against the person's cultural and religious norms (p. 270). Also, an intervention will be ineffective in changing social norms that tolerate forced marriages of children if it contradicts the community's cultural or religious values (p. 270). Phillips (2012) suggests that forced marriage must be tackled through practical interventions, which provide and promote support for young victims affected by such harmful practices (p. 27).

In Sum

In conclusion, early and forced child marriage is a harmful practice and worldwide issue affecting millions of children in primarily poor and marginalized communities which are mainly located in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Although there is no study determining the exact prevalence of EFCM in Canada, results of two Canadian studies suggests that the practice of forced marriage exists in Canada. EFCM is related to various socio-economic, cultural, religious, and legal factors. These factors include parents' perceptions of insecurity and fear, strict compliance with cultural and religious norms and customs, as well as social and legal tolerances and mentalities promoting EFCM. It can be very challenging for the Canadian government how to effectively deal with harmful practice of EFCM in Canada based on several factors. First, although EFCM is illegal in Canada, it may still be socially and culturally tolerated among members of some immigrant communities based on their cultural and religious customs, norms, and beliefs. Second, since EFCM is more likely to happen within a closed environment of a family or community, the victims, including children may refuse to seek help and report violence against themselves or others, for a number of reasons, such as stigma,

fear, cultural and religious backgrounds, language barriers, a lack of capability, and fear of the police, as well as the lack of knowledge or awareness about the support services available in communities. Finally, since EFCM is currently illegal in Canada, parents might move their children from Canada to another country for the purpose of performing forced or early marriages. All of these factors make preventing and responding to EFCM very challenging in Canada.

In order to eliminate harmful practice of EFCM, there is a need for multi-faceted responses that address multiple socio-economic, cultural, and legal factors that permit and condone the continuation and perpetuation of EFCM across communities. More specifically, there are practical solutions or responses, such as legislation and sensitization, that need to be taken at community, national, and international levels. One refers to implementation of more aggressive and protective laws for effectively tackling and responding to EFCM and not allowing any justifications or exceptions or excuses that tolerate EFCM, which is the case in Canada. The second tool is that since the practice of EFCM is socially and culturally tolerated in many communities across the globe, the law solely is insufficient in preventing EFCM and therefore, there is a need for change and challenge social norms, mentalities, and attitudes that tolerate EFCM in Canada. This can be done in community level through development of culturally appropriate and relevant intervention programs. These programs or intervention need to sensitize EFCM in a sense that the public, including children and parents, are aware of the practice and its associated risks. They also need to promote community-based dialogues and actively engage or incorporate the public, most importantly religious and cultural local leaders, in developing solutions for preventing and responding effectively to EFCM in Canada. They should also include educational and cultural sensitivity training sessions for professionals,

including the police and frontline service providers in order to help them to better recognize risk factors and protect EFCM victims in Canada.

The Present Study

The present study set out to explore the following three central questions:

- 1) What are the social, cultural, religious, and legal factors that members of the Iranian-Canadian community in British Columbia believe are associated with EFCM?
- 2) Do these members of Iranian-Canadian community acknowledge a need to discuss or address, prevent or respond to EFCM?
- 3) What responses do members of that Iranian-Canadian community suggest for preventing and responding to EFCM in their community?

In this research, a child refers to any person under the age of 16. The practice of EFCM refers to both early or forced marriage involving children. Currently, both child marriage and forced marriage, separately, are illegal in Canada (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 293.1 & 2*). Forced marriage is covered under the sections s. 293.1 and child marriage (otherwise a marriage under the age of 16) is covered under s. 293.2 of the *Canadian Criminal Code*. These two sections hold, anyone who participates in a marriage ceremony knowing that either one of the partners is forced into the marriage or under the age of 16, criminally responsible and liable for up to five years imprisonment. It is also an offence for anyone who knowingly and willfully performs a marriage (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 295*). No person is legally permitted to marry under the age of 16 in Canada (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 293.2*). A person under the age of 16 is prohibited from making the marriage agreement and anyone between the age 17 and 19 must have the consent of their parents or guardian under section 2.2 of *Civil Marriage Act, 2005 (Civil Marriage Act, 2005, s. 2.2)*. Finally, someone may also be placed on a judicial recognizance with conditions for

a period of up to one year (and two years if a repeat offender) if there are reasonable grounds to believe that person will commit an offence of forced or child marriage (*Criminal Code, 1985, s. 810.1 & 2*).

Chapter 3. Methods

Research Objectives

This study focused on the views and opinions of Iranian-Canadian community members' living in the Greater-Vancouver area (BC) on EFCM. Through qualitative interviews, this research sought to improve our understanding of how members of the Iranian community in BC perceive EFCM. The study was exploratory in nature and was not based on a particular theoretical framework. Key research questions included: what are some of the contributing factors to EFCM and how does this harmful practice impact children? What are some of the culturally relevant perspectives for developing strategies or interventions that aim to prevent and respond to EFCM in Canada? Although this research was not interested in participants' actual experiences or incidence of EFCM in Canada, some participants discussed potential issues and circumstances in which child marriages tend to occur. I explicitly asked participants to avoid discussing any actual instances of EFCM that they were personally aware of, either about themselves or anyone else. The reason is that this research was not interested in prevalence of child marriage. Rather, it was aimed to examine the perceptions of 16 members of Iranian-Canadian community. Also, the researcher would have been obligated to report any specific instances of child abuse in Canada. This could have discouraged some participants from disclosing or sharing their thoughts and opinions about EFCM. This limitation also made it hard to determine the occurrences, if any, of EFCM among members of Iranian-Canadian community.

Since the study sample consisted of 16 participants, the participants' opinions and perspectives gleaned on EFCM cannot be generalized to the rest of the Iranian population in BC or the rest of Canada. Also, participants were only from Vancouver in the Lower Mainland, their perspectives and opinions may differ from those Iranian-Canadians in other parts of Canada. Although the participants were from or belonged to various cultural (i.e. Kurdish and Persian) and different religious backgrounds (i.e. Muslims, Bahai's, and Alevi's) the study is neither representative of all cultures and religions in Iran, nor can they be representative of all cultures and religions from diaspora communities in Canada.

Several community-based agencies, such as Voices of Muslim Women, the Iranian Canadian Foundation, and the Civic Association of Iranian Canadians in Greater Vancouver were contacted through e-mail to see if they could help with recruiting participants (Appendix B, E-mail to Potential Participant). However, none of these agencies were interested in participating in the current research. I did not follow up on why those agencies were not interested in taking a part in this study, although I did contact them twice through e-mail. Only participants, including staff and adult students, from the MOSAIC and North Shore Multicultural Society agencies were recruited and interviewed for this study. The final consideration is that the study sample was recruited based on convenience.

This study was relevant and necessary among Iranian-Canadian communities since Iran is a country in which child marriage is legally and socially tolerated (UNICEF, 2018). Canada is home to about 125,825 Canadian-Iranians possessing various cultural, religious, ethnic backgrounds (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Being a member of Muslim, Kurdish, Iranian Canadian community, and living in Canada for more than nine years, I have a personal understanding of both the cultural and religious practices both in Iran and in the Iranian-Canadian community.

Since I am fluent in both Kurdish and Farsi, I was able to effectively communicate and build strong rapport with participants, before, during, and after the interviews. The main reason for having Kurdish and Farsi as an option was so that the participants would feel more comfortable to freely and deeply express their stories and opinions in their native language. This was an especially important consideration for participants whose first language was not English or if they had difficulties in telling their story in English. This may have allowed participants to provide their opinions and thoughts openly and freely. The language, cultural, and religious knowledge and understanding that I brought to the study allowed me to collect rich and relevant data. Compared to some other researchers who do not speak all of the languages or has the same social capital, I was better positioned to collect rich relevant data. Personally, I believe that this project was an excellent opportunity to examine perceptions of EFCM among members of Iranian-Canadian community

Recruitment

MOSAIC of BC and North Shore Multicultural Society assisted with recruitment of the participants by emailing a brief description of the research and the researcher as well as the researcher's contact information to prospective participants, including both their staff and adult students who learn English as their second language. The researcher also contacted community-based agencies such as Voices of Muslim Women, Iranian Canadian Foundation, and Civic Association of Iranian Canadians in Greater Vancouver through email to request if they could share a brief description of the research and the researcher's contact information to potential participants. No agreement was made between the researcher and the agencies who helped with the recruitment for the researcher to provide anything in return. A final copy of the study will be offered to participants if they wish.

This research did not focus on whether members of Iranian-Canadian communities were first, second, or third generation Canadians; nevertheless, all the participants had to be living in Canada for one or more years. The reason for selecting this time frame was to find participants who that had better insight on the practice of EFCM within Iranian communities in Canada. Although the age requirement for participating in this research was 19 years of age and above, the participants' ages ranged from 25 to 55. The expertise or level of formal and informal education ranged from psychologists (N=2), lawyers (N=1), refugee settlement workers (N=5), to citizens and immigrants who learn English as a second language (N=8). The participants included both Muslim and non-Muslim Iranian-Canadians, such as Baha'is, Alevi's, Christians, Muslims, and Atheists. Every participant, who was interviewed, was either a Canadian citizen or permeant resident. No undocumented individuals were interviewed.

Interviews

I obtained a minimal risk approval from the UFV Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) (see Appendix C, Minimal Risk Approval) before the interviews. In total, 16 (nine males and seven females) members of Iranian-Canadian community living in Greater Vancouver were interviewed through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. These were conducted over a period of two months, between November 2017 and December 2017. All the interview questions (see Appendix A, Interview Questions) and consent forms (see Appendix D, Consent Form) were translated, both orally and written, from English to Farsi and Kurdish and were double-checked with native-Farsi or Kurdish speaking individuals before any interviews take place. All the participants signed a consent form in compliance with UFV's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) regulations. A digital audio recording device was used only to record the content of interviews with the participants' permission. Interviews and interview questions were provided

in the participants' preferred language, either in English, Persian (Farsi) or Kurdish. None of the interviews were conducted in English.

Interviews questions were primarily open-ended and were aimed to encourage participants to share their thoughts and opinions on EFCM in their community in Canada. Interviews were aimed to examine the perceptions of participants on EFCM within BC. Each interview took place at a location preferred by the participants and took approximately thirty minutes to an hour to complete and occurred only once with each participant. None of the participants were interested in reviewing the interview transcripts although I asked them that they could have a copy of the transcripts if they wish, but nine participants were interested in the final copy of the major project. The identities of all the participants were protected using pseudonyms. All of data, which were based on the participants' direct words and opinions, were translated, transcribed, and interpreted directly by the researcher. Then, coding and analysis of the data were done using NVivo 11⁹. Related themes, sub-themes, and concepts were selected and interpreted by the researcher. A total of 10 themes and 4 sub-themes were chosen from all the data, 16 interviews.

Chapter 4. Findings/Results

Interview Findings

The following findings, including direct quotes and paraphrased concepts, are based on the perceptions and opinions expressed by the 16 participants from the Greater Vancouver Iranian-Canadian community. It is important to note that the perceptions of the members of Iranian-Canadian community included child marriages whether they took place in Canada or

⁹ NVivo 11: a computer software that is often used for coding and analyzing qualitative data from interviews or focused groups.

Iran. Although this research primarily focuses on findings that are relevant to the Canadian situation, four of the sixteen participants, two of whom got married under 16 and the two others got married at 17 years of age in their country of origin, talked about their own prior experiences. The remaining participants talked about their thoughts and opinions on EFCM.

Two themes related to the definition of EFCM:

- 1st Theme: Child marriage is forced.
- 2nd Theme: Puberty as a threshold for child marriage and child's maturity.

Three themes and three sub-themes related to contributing factors in EFCM:

- 1st Theme: Child marriage as a shared cultural and religious practice
 - 1st Sub-Theme: The influence of poverty within a cultural and religion community
 - 2nd Sub-Theme: Child marriage as a protective shield for collective morality and honour within a religious and cultural community
- 2nd Theme: The less family members, the better economic hardship;
 - 1st Sub-theme: “Jin-bi-jin” or bride exchange and “Khoonbaha¹⁰” or blood price.
- 3rd Theme: Law permits child marriage

Five themes related to harmful effects of EFCM:

- 1st Theme: A child becomes like the “Walking dead
- 2nd Theme: A child feels that everything in her life is forced;
- 3rd Theme: A girl is too young to be a mother

¹⁰ “Khoonbaha” is a Kurdish phrase, which is translated into “blood price”. Blood price refers to an amount of money that is given as a compensation to a family who has lost its member in a fight between two families or tribes (Participant, Hirish).

- 4th Theme: Child marriage as a harmful practice harming everyone, including the society
- 5th Theme: Children are robbed of their childhood.

Finally, two themes and one sub-theme related to preventive and responding measures against EFCM:

- 1st Theme: Education for everyone is key preventive measure
 - 1st Sub-Theme: Changing and challenging social norms and attitudes condoning EFCM
- 2nd Theme: Every marriage must be officially registered in Canada

Participants' Definition of EFCM

For the majority of the participants (13 out of 16 participants), child marriage was referred to a situation in which one or both partners getting married were children. Nevertheless, the victim of child marriage was mainly referred to a girl who was between 10 to 15 years of age although few participants also talked about how boys are affected by EFCM.

1st Theme: Child marriage is forced

One important theme that emerged throughout most interviews was that participants did not separate a child marriage from a forced marriage. In other words, for the majority of the participants, child marriage is mainly forced, especially since a child, who is still immature, cannot give a free and volunteer consent and thus cannot play much role in decision-making for her or his marriage.

The majority of the responses suggest that girls' consent for marriage is either ignored or influenced by her father whose decision for marriage of his children, in turn is influenced by his cultural and religious expectations and norms. These participants further suggested that male

figures' such as older sons of the family or uncles usually make all the decisions -including the decision for a marriage of children, within the household. In other words, based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants, even if the child agreed to the marriage, his or her consent is most likely influenced or coerced by other environmental factors, such as parents' decisions as well as parents' cultural/religious expectations and norms. For example, one participant said:

All of the decisions, including a marriage of a child, are made by the men, mainly father within a traditional family. (Participant, Ben)

Seven of the participants further add that the father has the power and authority in the household to arrange the marriage and pressure or force a girl into a marriage. For example, one participant stated:

Under the Sharia laws in Iran, the father is authorized and entitled to make all the decisions to ensure that he guarantees the future of his children, economically and socially. The decision for marriage of a child is one of those decisions in which the father is entitled to and can interfere with the life of his children. (Participant, Mej)

Five different participants explained that the practice of EFCM was carried out in such a way that the role of a child, mainly girls, in the decision-making for a marriage was hugely limited. More specifically, participants noted that young girls involved in EFCM were not able to reject the decision made by her parents. Instead, they were obligated to accept whatever decision was made by their parents for their marriage and relationship whether or not they like or consent to it. For example, this participant said:

Child (or early marriage) is a marriage whereby a young girl, either did not consent to the marriage entirely, or agreed to the marriage, but her consent was influenced by [outside factors], such as her parents, her culture and religion, norms and traditions. Also, someone else, whose decision is influenced by cultural and religious norms/traditions, or what is known as

“Sonnet,” decides [the marriage] for the child who to marry. Therefore, I think some elements of force always exist in any child marriage. (Participant, Hirish¹¹)

Two different participants further explained the nature and degree of force or coercion involving in EFCM.

In a forced marriage, the child does not give consent, as outside forces, either from the girl’s parents, society, or the environment, are imposed on the child. (Participant, Nilo)

Also,

A forced marriage does not have to involve any actual or physical force. Instead, it can be based on the family’s expectations or norms, creating an environment or atmosphere in which a child is expected to, or often coerced to give consent to a decision that was already determined by someone else. (Participant, Abdul)

These two above responses suggest that participants discussed that the degree and nature of ‘force’ has several dimensions. First, that a child is not always forced physically into a marriage, rather he or she can often be pressured or coerced into a marriage through financial, emotional, and psychological pressure, threats, or the loss of emotional and financial family support. Second, that a child might be forced into a marriage against his or her will based on the parents’ cultural and religious expectations and norms. Nevertheless, three participants said that boys, unlike girls, were less likely to be pressured or coerced into marriage by their fathers because boys were more likely to protest against their father’s decision and run away if they noticed that they were going to be forced into a marriage. These three participants further added that since parents were afraid to lose their sons, they were less likely to force them to marry.

2nd Theme: Puberty as a threshold for child marriage and child’s maturity

¹¹ Hirish is a pseudonym that is used to protect the identification of this participant and all other participants in this research also have a pseudonym, which is not their real name.

Another important theme emerged throughout thirteen interviews was the view that the definition of a child is related to religious interpretations regarding the age of maturity or puberty, also known as “Bolookh [بلوغ]¹².” This point in life for a girl traditionally was the most relevant threshold for a child marriage based on her parents’ perceptions. In other words, as soon as a girl reaches puberty, she, regardless of her age, is no longer treated as a child in the eyes of parents as well as both cultural and religious Iranian community; rather, she is assumed to be ready for marriage.

For example, per below, four participants explained such a threshold (the moment a girl reaches puberty) and how it is determined and by who.

A religious leader, known as “Molla” or “Akhoond” [آخوند]¹³ has the authority and right to decide whether or not a child is mature enough for marriage even if a child has not reached puberty yet, a child can still get married to his or her partner, but the couple do not live with each other, until they reach puberty or “Bolookh.” For girls, this is 12 years of age and for boys 15 years of age. (Participant, Naz).

Another participant stated:

A child’s maturity for marriage is determined when a girl reaches puberty. However, a lot of the time, even if a child has not reached puberty, the “Akhoond” may allow the marriage to happen under religious, customary laws and obligations. By this, a girl as young as six, seven or eight can be declared ready for marriage. (Participant, Layla)

Also,

Early marriage is when an immature child gets married based on her or his parents’ decisions. This often happens as soon as a child reaches puberty, but the child is still immature, physically and mentally. (Participant, Magic)

Similarly, another participant stated:

¹² “Bolookh [بلوغ] is a Persian concept that refers to a stage of a child’s development when a child reaches puberty (Participant, Naz).

¹³ The name Molla or Akhoond [آخوند] specifically refers to Islamic religious clergies who wear a turban or Emama and a long coat in Iran, Afghanistan, and other Islamic countries. These people are Islamic religious leaders or preachers (Participant, Layla).

Maturity is determined when a girl experiences puberty, but a lot of time, even if a child has not reached puberty, the “Molla” or “Akhoond” allows, accepts, and registers the marriage under religious customary laws and obligations. So, I think this puts girls as young as 6, 7, or 8 at a risk of child marriage. (Participant, Layla).

An important theme, in relation to all four participants, herein is that a child, who has not reached puberty, can be married as long as the father gives a permission and a religious leader determines that a child is mature enough for marriage. These perspectives indicate that child marriage may occur before puberty (even if a child is still physically and mentally immature). Another important sub-theme emerged throughout nine participants was that the maturity of a child, is determined by personal discretion of a religious leader known as “Molla” or “Akhoond”. These nine participants also added that in many traditional communities in Iran, religious leaders have a significant power for the determination of girls’ maturity and validation of child marriages, especially when the father gives a permission.

Another participant talked about an Islamic religious ceremony known as “Jashn-e taklif,” [جشن تکلیف]¹⁴ which celebrates the maturity of girls at nine years of age.

In Iranian elementary schools, when a girl reaches nine years of age, her school officially celebrates an event called a “Jashn-e taklif,” which translated into “celebration of child’s maturity.” Once the event is completed, a girl is required to wear a white dress, known as a “Chador” that covers her body entirely, including her hair. She is also obligated to wear a Hijab all the time because she is now a “Mokallaf,” [مکلف]¹⁵, a person who is religiously obligated to fulfill Islamic religious obligations, norms, and traditions, such as covering her hair from male strangers and praying five times a day and fasting. Additionally, this celebration suggests that a young girl is now ready for marriage. These forms of culture are created and supported by the religion of Islam and practiced as both cultural and religious traditions and norms at Islamic schools in Iran. This way of thinking originated from Islam and

¹⁴ “Jashn-e taklif,” [جشن تکلیف] refers to ceremony through which the maturity of a child is celebrated, and this is when as soon as a child reaches puberty (Participant, Kani).

¹⁵ “Mokallaf,” [مکلف] is a person who is religiously obligated to fulfill all the religious obligations and expectations. An individual is obligated as soon as he or she reaches puberty (Participant, Kani).

transferred to Islamic cultures and communities and have become unbreakable traditions and norms. (Participant, Kani)

The above participant talked about a religious ceremony in which the child's puberty is celebrated. Once a girl, as young as nine years of age, goes through this ceremony, she is no longer treated as a child. Instead, she is expected to act like an adult and required to fulfill religious obligations and expectations, such as covering her body, fasting, and praying. Altogether, based on the perceptions of thirteen participants, puberty as a religious threshold, puts a girl, as young as nine years of age, at a risk of child marriage in many cultural and religious Iranian communities.

Potential Contributing Factors Leading to EFCM

3rd Theme: Child marriage as a shared cultural and religious practice

One theme emerged throughout the majority of the participants (13 out of 16) was that child marriage was carried out as a shared cultural and religious norm and custom among members of Iranian cultural and traditional religious communities. Based on the perceptions of all thirteen participants, the practice of EFCM mostly occurs among members of Iranian traditional families where the community is poor and marginalized and whereby parents are less educated and less engaged in urban life; and at the same time, people are more conservative with complying and conforming with cultural and religious values, known as “Sonnet, Orf, and Rossum.” Five participants further talked about the perceptions that when parents are poor and less educated, formally or informally, they are less likely to become aware of the negative consequences of EFCM and thus more likely to accept the marriage of their children at a very young age. Nevertheless, two different participants further explained how parents either do not know about the negative consequences of child marriage or willfully blind themselves to the harmful effects of EFCM on children. For example, one participant stated:

Sometimes, based on cultural or religious mentalities, parents believe that if they force their children to marry within their own culture or religion, children will be happier and less likely to divorce because it [divorce] is not acceptable. Parents (mainly the father) believe that divorce is the end of the family's honour and reputation, but this is not true... Parents forget that divorce exists in every culture and religion. They need to understand that if two people cannot live together, for whatever reason, it is okay to get a divorce. And, if two people do not want to live together, they should not be forced into a relationship. (Participant, Solhy)

Two participants explained a relationship between EFCM and lack of informal education and level of integration into mainstream culture or society.

Unlike modern communities, EFCM happens in communities where there is a lack of education and respect for fundamental human and children's rights... If you only stick with your community and do not go out, you stay in your circle and do not learn any new things. Gaining more education and new experiences allows you to leave your inner-circle and think creatively. It allows you to step outside your comfort zone. It enables you to integrate and engage in mainstream societies. When immigrants come to Canada, if they do not participate in other communities, they are more likely to live under a tribal mentality and are more likely to engage in harmful practices. Therefore, they will prefer, and even force, their children to marry according to their own culture or religion. (Participant, Ben)

Similarly, another participant noted:

Practices like EFCM exist in many cultures and religions in the Middle East, especially in communities where there is a lack of modern culture and education. In these communities, people are very committed to traditional norms, beliefs, and practices. Compliance with these norms is done to protect the morality of the family and community. In these communities, children are treated as property. Parents expect all members of the family to work and live collectively to survive socially and economically as a group. Also, parents see EFCM as a unique way to protect and maintain their personal, cultural, religious and ethnic identity and traditions within the community. (Participant, Abdul)

An important sub-theme, based on above responses, is the perceptions that when parents are less educated, they can easily be influenced by other forces, such as culture and/or religion.

Thus, parents can become very conservative and fall into compliance with traditional,

conservative, and patriarchal cultural and religious beliefs, norms and traditions. As a result, these parents are more likely to carry out harmful practices, such as EFCM, to uphold moral values within their culture or religion. In this context, child marriage is often treated as a key parental responsibility, particularly for parents in a more collectivist¹⁶ traditional Iranian community. At the same time, parents believe that marriage of a child at a very early age will bring happiness and security for their children and family. Based on these values, children are treated as a form of wealth for the families: they are expected to work, live, and decide collectively to survive socially and financially. Another related sub-theme was that the pressure from cultural and religious community often influence's parents' decisions for accepting the marriage of their children.

For example, according to most of the participants, in many traditional Iranian community, a religious leader within a particular religion, such as Islam, has a significant religious power and authority to validate the marriages, including child marriage. The following two participants talked about how a religious leader (or 'Akhoond') can accept, authorize, and validate a marriage of children at a very young age. Nevertheless, based on the perceptions of three participants, the local or cultural leaders within cultural communities in Iran were not

¹⁶ A collectivist community is defined based on four values "loyalty, hierarchy, honour, and agency" within a particular community (Akkuş, Postmes, and Stroebe, 2017, p. 2). First, loyalty is when all members of a community are expected to show a high level of faithfulness towards their community or group through care and communal cooperation. The second value is hierarchy within which roles and position are considered. In this community, generally men have more voice than women. Also, the opinions of elders are more important, and the status of elders is also higher than the younger generations. The third value is honour which requires respect and compliance for community's rules and regulations. Each member is responsible and expected to behave in certain way to avoid violating community's norms and those who fail to protect the family's and community's honour, can become subject of punishment. The last value is personal agency in a community. Based on this, an individual has personal agency and autonomy to make their own decisions and responsible for their own life choices as long as their decisions do not jeopardize the community's values of honour, loyalty, and hierarchy (Akkuş et al., 2017, pp. 4-5). Iran can be considered as a collectivist society in which members put a high value on being loyal to a larger community, protecting the honour of the family and community, respecting elders' decisions and opinions, and ensuring that our decisions or life choices are not contradicting the values of a community as a whole.

granted such power and authority to validate or solemnize a marriage. Five different participants similarly supported that religious leaders have significant authority to validate child marriages, regardless of the legality of the child marriage, in Iranian traditional communities. These participants further added that religious leaders also have the authority to determine whether a child is mature enough for the marriage based on their own personal discretion. For example,

Under Islamic Sharia law, an “Akhoond” has considerable social, cultural, and religious authority in the community. This person is religiously, and often legally authorized, to validate a child marriage, either for themselves, or for their associates or friends. But, this power is not given to a local or cultural community leader. Once a religious leader accepts a child marriage, the marriage is religiously valid and does not need to be officially registered unless the new married couple want to register their marriage officially. (Participant, Layla)

Under Sharia law, a girl can marry as young as nine years of age. She does not need to wait until she is 18 years of age. This mentality still exists in Kurdistan mainly to protect the girl’s chastity and honour and is supported and embraced by the Islamic faith and culture. (Participant, Kani)

Seven participants believed that the roots of child marriage trace back to the historical marriage between the Prophet Muhammad and a nine-year-old girl named, Aysha. Based on the perceptions of these participants, child marriage is a religious practice that is tolerated in Islamic culture in Iran. For example, the following participant talks about the role of Islam in child marriage.

In my opinion, religion, particularly Islam, plays a crucial role in child marriage. I see Prophet Muhammad as a role model for many Muslims who believe in and accept marriages of children. Muhammad through his ignorance, fell in love and slept with an uneducated nine-year-old girl named Aysha and called it [the marriage] the “passionate love for Aysha.” When an individual like Muhammad is a role model for thousands of thousands of Muslims, what can an ordinary person do? A lot of Muslims want to follow his way of life and marriage. (Participant, Pori)

Child marriage is very popular among those who believe in Islam. And this is traces back to the historical marriage of Mohammad with a nine years old girl, named Aysha. Therefore, child marriage is a tradition in Islam and is based on the Islamic Prophet's marriage, based on which many religious leaders and members of Islamic countries allows the marriage of girl at as young as 9 and boys as young as 15 years of age, which is the age of puberty or maturity. (Participant, Amin)

One important theme, based on the perceptions of seven interviews, was that many Muslims see the marriage of Prophet Muhammad as a role model for themselves, especially since many Muslims want to follow the Prophet Muhammad's ways of life.

The majority of participants (13 out of 16) used Islamic religious leaders and customs as examples to demonstrate their views and opinions although few participants used another religion, such as Yarsanis in Iran. For example, one participant explained:

Yarsan, as a religion in Iran, is a good example. Yarsanis are not Muslims but are religious. Their religious values, rules, and principles are different to those of Islamic one. Yarsanis are religiously obligated to only get married within their own religion. This is a clear form of force by a religion, not necessarily Islam.

1st Sub-Theme: The influence of poverty within a cultural and religion community

One important sub-theme based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants was that when a family is poor and traditional within a cultural and religious community in Iran, the religion and culture have more influences on people. More specifically, the majority of the participants supported that when families are poor, they are more strict with complying with cultural and religious customs and traditions and thus are more likely to carry EFCM as a compliance with their cultural and religious customs and norms. For example, the following two participants explained the role of poverty in EFCM among members of religious and cultural community in Iran.

I think all three factors, such as culture, poverty and religion, together play an important role in child marriage. These three factors are interconnected and feed each other all the time. Nevertheless, a relationship between culture and religion is very unique because a lot of time religion has more influence on culture in poor and disadvantaged communities. In poor communities, culture and religion together create an environment in which the parents always make the decisions for their children, and the children have to rely on their parents to survive socially and economically. This makes children not only, to depend on their parents, but also must always stay with their parents even after they grow up and form a family. This situation of dependency leads children to always comply with whatever their parents say/decide for the households to avoid dishonouring the family's norms and expectations. (Participant, Abdul)

Also,

In traditional poor communities, poverty and religion depend on each other, and people must work and decide collectively in order to survive and improve their situation unlike modern families where people work individually and make decisions on their own. Also, culture and religion are like twins or even similar to a person's legs, in that the person cannot stand on their own without both of them. Both are connected and depend on each other all the time. (Participant, Ben)

One important theme emerged throughout above responses was that in a poor and traditional community in Iran, the religion and culture create an environment in which children have to depend on their parents and comply with whatever decision, including the decision for their marriage, is made for them by their parents. Other related subtheme, based on the perceptions of seven participants, was that in these traditional communities, the religion dictates or influences the culture of that community and tends to play a crucial role in people's everyday lives. At the same time, it was difficult for many members of traditional Iranian communities to distinguish culture from religion since both culture and religion are closely interconnected and mixed. Therefore, in traditional Iranian communities, culture and religion together contribute in EFCM.

When I asked some of the participants whether they believed that customs, norms and traditions originated from culture or religion, some responded that these items or concepts came

from both culture and religion, whereas others responded that these items originated from a religion, mainly. The following five participants explained the roots of norms, customs, and traditions in culture and religion in Iran and how they play a role in EFCM.

The practice of child marriage depends on two conditions. First, in some communities in Iran, religion or, more specifically, religious traditions and beliefs, have the most significant influence on a culture and people's daily lives. Second, in an Iranian traditional culture, the compliance with cultural traditions and norms play a key role in child marriage. This practice has moved from one generation to another over a long period. Thus, religious norms and traditional culture are relevant to the issue of EFCM. (Participant, Hirish)

Also, traditions, norms, and customs come from culture and religion, both of which have the most significant influence on their perpetuation and preservation of EFCM. These two concepts [culture and religion] are inseparable. They overlap with each other all the time and are very close to one another. For example, in Iran, if a Muslim girl decides to marry a man from a religion of Baha'i which is a different faith from Islam in Iran. The marriage will consider against Islamic religious obligations and the girl's family might force her to marry a Muslim man, instead. You can see that both religion and culture play a role in these forms of forced marriage. These cultural and religious norms and customs dictate that you are not allowed to marry someone outside of your religion and culture. (Participant, Moe)

Another participant stated,

I think customs and traditions are driven by the Islamic religion and culture. In Iran, these two things are very mixed and inseparable. People tried to separate the faith from the culture but failed. These norms, customs, and traditions are supported by the culture, which is influenced by the Islamic faith. (Participant, Nilo)

On the other hand, one participant explained the role of religion and culture, not necessarily Islamic culture or religion, in the perpetration of EFCM.

In Iran, it is hard to distinguish a culture from a religion because both are mixed. It is also very challenging to determine whether these concepts [traditional norms and customs] originate from culture or religion. Yarsanie is a good example for demonstrating this. Yarsanie is a religion different from Islam. One Yarsanie tradition requires family members to get married within their religion. This form of indirect force comes from Yarsanie religious obligations, not necessarily Islamic faith. Similarly, Turkmen, who are mainly

Muslims, who are another ethnic minority in Iran. Not so long ago, Turkmens could not marry outside their culture or ethnicity. These two examples suggest that members from both communities, one of which is religious and the other which is cultural, are obligated to marry within their religion and/or culture.

Another example would be to compare the province of Kurdistan, as a non-religious area, with Isfahan, which is the home of “Sufies¹⁷” both of which are located in Iran. In Kurdistan, child marriage is highly prevalent although the people are not religious, whereas, in Isfahan, the rate of child marriage is the lowest however it is one of the holiest provinces in Iran. I think in addition to culture and religion, factors such as education, poverty, and urban life also play a role in these marriages. Therefore, drawing a line between whether traditions are rooted in religion or culture is very challenging, especially in societies where religion plays a dominant role in people’s everyday life. I would say all those concepts can sometimes come from religion and other times from culture. (Participant, Naz)

Another participant mentions the roots of norms, traditions, and customs in both culture and religion and how they play a role in EFCM.

When a leader does something, people follow them without question. Child marriage follows a similar pattern. Someone engaged in these practices a long time ago and have continued until now. I think norms and customs come from both culture and religion. A tradition, such as having more than one wife, relates to religion but it is also culturally accepted and practiced. Similarly, customs are supported by religion. For example, the culture in Bangladesh is very different from Turkey, although both societies practice Islam and embrace formal and informal Islamic practices and traditions. Culture and religion certainly overlap with each other to protect norms and customs. Together these two create an environment supportive of child marriage.

For example, two families might have a good relationship with each other and take advantage of it by marrying or exchanging their daughters, which is a social factor, rather than something that is cultural or religious. The root of norms or traditions can involve the culture, as it allows the practice of child marriage to continue from one generation to another. In the Islamic faith, the Quran allows a girl to marry as young as nine years of age. Abdullah, the father of the Prophet Muhammad, was 17 when he had Muhammad, who then got married to a nine-year-old girl named Aysha. He also handed his daughter, Fatima, over for marriage when she was nine. Therefore, the child

¹⁷ Sufi is a Muslim individual with an Islamic belief who is seeking to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God (Encyclopedia Britannica Schimmel, 2017).

marriage is seen as a legitimate practice under Islamic culture and religion.
(Participant, Evista).

Based on the perceptions of five participants above, the practice of EFCM among members of Iranian community is carried out based on both religious and cultural norms, traditions, and customs, all of which originated from both culture and religion of a particular community, not necessarily just Islamic culture or religion, in Iran. Therefore, traditional cultural and religious norms and customs play a pivotal role in EFCM and originate from both culture and religion. The overall perception was that cultural and religion are closely interconnected and mixed and traditional norms, customs, and beliefs, playing a key role in EFCM, are driven by both culture and religion in Iranian traditional community. Importantly, five different participants further explained that in some traditional communities in Iran, informal religious and customary laws and values are more dominant relative to the formal written Iranian laws, which are less likely to be followed or obeyed by the members of religious and cultural communities in Iran. These participants believed that a marriage of a child could be carried out within a cultural and religious community in Iran, and the couple would not see it necessary to register the marriage officially anywhere and the Iranian laws would not have any consequences for those who permit the child marriage, especially since the marriage is permitted by the cultural and religious norms, customs, and traditions.

2nd Sub-Theme: Child marriage as a protective shield for collective morality and honour within a religious and cultural community

A fourth important sub-theme that emerged among the majority of participants' responses (13 out of 16) was that the marriage of a child was treated as a shield to protect the families honour and reputation within a religious and cultural community in Iran. This notion is closely associated with parents' perceptions that the sooner the marriage of their children would occur,

the better it would be for the entire family and children. This theme also relates to parents' feelings of fear and perceptions of insecurity about the future of their children (e.g., economically, culturally, and religiously).

For example, one participant talked about how a parent's perception of fear and insecurity play a role in EFCM.

I think sometimes a child marriage is carried out to protect a child's virginity or prevent an unwanted pregnancy before she gets married, especially when she is beautiful. The family believes that if their child, mainly girl, gets married earlier, it is better for the family and children. First, she will not shame the family. Second, when she gets married and forms a family earlier on, this is respected in Islam. Also, the sooner, she gets married, the more beneficial it is for the husband since she can easily be controlled and manipulated as she is young and inexperienced. Due to her inexperience, she will obey whatever her husband tells her. (Participant, Layla)

Another participant talked about parents' fear of being judged by others within a community.

EFCM occurs when parents want to follow their culture and religion. These children become a victim of their cultural and religious ways of being. In some Iranian communities, people live in fear of others. They are so scared of people's judgments, stereotypes and gossip. They are afraid of what other people will talk about behind their backs. The fear that parents have of others is not the same for God. If a child makes a mistake, parents worry about what others will say or how they will behave towards them. They are not worried about how they will help the child heal and recover. This assumption results in fear and anxiety, which itself plays a crucial role in parents forcing their children to marry another person to avoid them from making wrong decisions. The mentality of living for, and fearing others pushes parents to have their children marry at a very young age. (Participant, Solhy)

Similarly, two other participants talked about how parents are afraid that their children might engage in behaviours that will damage the family's honour and reputation.

As parents, the sooner your child gets married, the better it is before your child makes a wrong decision, such as getting pregnant or having a boyfriend or

girlfriend. That can bring embarrassment and shame to a family and damage their reputation within the community and to their culture. Also, to the parents, if some of the neighbours are happy with their family's decisions, then God will also be happy. They ignore the fact that God will never be pleased with choices that destroy their children's life and happiness. Parents who force their children to marry at a young age believe they have fulfilled their duty as parents. They think that, through the marriage, their children will no longer make a wrong decision. (Participant, Solhy)

Also,

In some communities, the concepts of "Qayrat and Namooos", translated into "honour and chastity", play a key role in these (early and forced) marriages. This is based on the mentality that a girl must get married before she engages in inappropriate behaviours, such as sexual misconduct with another male that can bring dishonour and shame to a family's reputation. Therefore, these marriages are carried out to avoid perceived dishonour, guilt, and embarrassment. (Participant, Evista)

This theme also relates to a mentality that girls should get married before she engages in real or perceived 'sexual misconduct' that can result in shame and dishonour to the entire family. Five participants explained that in traditional Iranian communities, people place a very high value on the protection of female chastity and are afraid for the loss of a girl's virginity once she reaches puberty. This includes parents' 'feelings of insecurity and fear of being judged by other community members for their children's, specifically female child', wrongdoings which can jeopardize the honour of the family and community. Therefore, based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants (13 out of 16), parents' perceptions of insecurity and fear encourage them to force their child into marriage as soon as their children reach puberty and before they go wrong. On the other hand, three participants believed that compliance with cultural and religious traditions, norms, and customs could bring positive rewards for a family, whereas non-compliance would bring adverse effects. This paradox illustrates that parents' decisions regarding EFCM can be influenced by other people around them, such as neighbours or

community members, such as local and religious leaders and elders. Overall, the protection of morality embraced by culture and religion in collectivist and traditional communities was another critical factor in EFCM.

4th Theme: The less family members, the better economic hardship

All of the participants believed that poverty or economic disadvantage plays a very significant role in EFCM among members of Iranian communities. For example, two participants talked about the relationship between poverty and child marriage.

When a family is economically disadvantaged and unable to pay for their expenses, the parents might decide to give their daughter to a man who is economically and socially well-established even if he is a lot older than the bride. If the bride disagrees with the family's decision for marriage, then a family will force her. The family sees child marriages as an opportunity or strategy for eliminating overall costs to the family and thus, improving the economic and social status of the family. The father believes that the child marriage will provide a better future for his daughter and therefore decides who she can marry. And, if she disagrees, he will force her to accept his decision. (Participant, Layla)

Likewise,

In many traditional Iranian communities, families see their daughters as a form of property. In these communities, the family will often force their daughter(s) to marry close relatives or blood kinship, such as a cousin or close relative, first. The marriage of Balooch girls to wealthy people in business is quite popular in Afghan communities. The groom is usually very rich and has a high level of social status whereas the bride is typically poor, but she can be very beautiful. These marriages are mainly economic-based since they tend to improve the economic status of the young bride and her family and social relationship between the two families, generally. (Participant, Naz)

Similarly, the following participant talked about a concept of bride price or some amount of money that is given to the bride's family in return for their daughter.

The family, mainly the father, usually gains specific financial benefits, such as cash or non-cash materials, which could include things like a car or a house

from the groom or his family. We call this a “Shirbaha”¹⁸,” which is translated into a bride price. (Participant, Pori)

Also, seven different participants further explained situations in which low-income families may have a lot of children, but unable to pay for the basic necessities of life for their both male and female children. This often leads parents to find wealthy husbands for their young daughters in return for money. In this situation, a marriage of a child is seen as an opportunity or strategy for the family and children to improving their overall economic situation. Based on this, the family believes that the sooner their daughters get married, the better it is for the family and children, financially. These participants also talked about how girls in Iranian traditional families are treated as form of property. Based on these perceptions of the parents, many poor families marry off their daughters at a very young age, despite of the harmful effects for those marriages on the child; and if children disagree, the parent tend to force them directly or indirectly into a marriage.

Exceptional Circumstances (e.g: Compensation and Exchange Marriage) Permitting EFCM

1st Sub-theme: “Jin-bi-jin” or “berdel” or bride exchange

Two participants talked about some of the unique circumstances, such as “Jin-bi-jin,” which is translated into the concept of “bride exchange,” under which child marriage is socially and culturally tolerated in Iranian Kurdish communities. A bride exchange occurs when two families exchange their daughters for their sons to reduce marriage expenses or wedding costs. Based on the perceptions of these two participants, a bride exchange is closely associated with parents’ perceptions of insecurity and fear about the future of their children, in the sense that it is mainly done to improve the social and economic status of the family and children, strengthen

¹⁸ Shirbaha is a persian phrase which is translated into “bride price” or an amount of property or money as a compensation for marriage, given to the bride’s family by the groom or his family (Participant, Pori).

families' relationships, and control the social and sexual life of the young girls. One participant defined the Kurdish concept of "jin-bi-jin" which is translated into "woman for woman" and similar to the English concept of a "bride exchange" as follows:

In Kurdish communities, there is a form of child marriage called "jin-bi-jin." Under this practice, families exchange their daughters for their sons to marry. Both Islamic culture and religion support this. This practice is very similar to selling or trading female slaves, which traces back to the era of slavery and the Prophet Muhammad around 1400 years ago when you could sell or exchange your "Kaniz," or female slaves with other people (Participant, Kani)

This participant believed that the concept of "jin-bi-jin," or bride exchange is very patriarchal because girls are mainly targeted and similar to the sexual exploitation of female children and slaves, which traces back to the era of Prophet Muhammad and the way people at that time treat their slaves. Under a concept of "jin-bi-jin," young girls are exchanged or 'sold' between two families in order to reduce the costs related to wedding and control girls' sexuality and reproduction.

The second unique circumstance of child marriage was when a young girl is forced into a marriage to prevent a conflict between two tribes or families, regardless of her age and whether or not she agrees to the marriage. For example, a young girl might be offered by her parents as a blood price to another family who has lost a family member as a result of a fight or conflict. Based on the perceptions of these two participants, the agreement is made informally through religious and local leaders and elders without any interference from the Iranian legal system.

3rd Theme: Law permits child marriage

Based on the perceptions of all of the participants, the Iranian laws regarding the marriage are ineffective in preventing child marriage, especially since the practice of child marriage is legally and socially tolerated in Iran. Therefore, all of the participants believed that

the lack of appropriate legal actions plays a significant role in EFCM in Iran. For example, the following two participants talked about how the law is often silent against child marriage in Iran.

Parents who marry of their children at a young age, do not become subject to any punishment or wrongdoing since the practice of EFCM aims at protecting religious and cultural values in Iran through Sharia laws. In many places, the legal system does not apply or becomes irrelevant since these marriages are accepted informally by religious leaders outside of the courts without the knowledge of state officials, such as judges or the police. (Participant, Solhy)

Similarly,

Also, in Iran, you can officially register for marriage at the age of 18. However, you can get married at a lot younger age under religious rules and the legitimization of a spiritual leader. A legal marriage registration occurs when both partners turn 18 years of age. Nevertheless, this law does not prevent children from marrying before the age of 18. Under such a law, a girl can get married as young as 13 and boys, as young as 15 years of age. This situation shows that the law does not prevent child marriage. (Participant, Kani)

The majority of the participants acknowledged that under the Islamic Sharia laws in Iran, girls could legally marry at the age of 13 and boys at the age of 15. However, girls living in rural and impoverished areas can get married as young as nine years of age under religious and customary laws as long as there is parental consent and involvement. Their responses included the lack of appropriate legal actions, such as the lack of compulsory minimum legal age for marriage, nationally as well as penalties and accountability for those who permit or legitimize child marriages. Their responses also included notions of how child marriages were authorized by religious leaders but either were not officially registered at all or were registered when both partners were legally permitted for marriage in Iran.

Potential Adverse Consequences of EFCM

All of the participants acknowledged that when a child, who is not physically and mentally developed, is forced into an unwanted relationship, the child becomes entirely dysfunctional, physically, emotionally/psychologically, and socially.

Physical Harms

1st Theme: A child becomes like a “walking dead”

Four participants shared the beliefs that when a girl enters into a coerced marriage, she turns into something similar to the “walking dead,” (Participant, Solhy) where her soul is destroyed permanently, but her physical body might be able to move around. For example, here is what some of the participants talked about the physical and emotional effects of EFCM.

When a family forces their daughter to marry another person, the family kills her mentally and emotionally. It [forced marriage of children] damages her soul, and there is no recovery. She becomes like a “walking dead,” and only her body can move around. The moment she is forced into marriage her soul dies. It is almost as if she died a long time ago, but her funeral has been delayed. When a child is not happy with her life and then she becomes a mother—she remains unhappy. She is not interested in anything whether it be sports, love or social life. When a girl is like a “dead person,” what do you expect from her? And, how do you expect her to love her children when has never received any love, respect or compassion from anyone? When a child does not feel or receive love, she or he cannot show it towards others. Once you receive love, then you can share it with others. (Participant, Solhy)

Similarly, the following two participants talked about how a child, who is forced into a relationship, feels that she is being raped all the time.

When a child is forced into a marriage, she sees sex as an assault on her physical body and emotions. However, she is helpless and cannot escape. Instead, she knows that she must accept the forced marriage. She becomes like a “walking dead” whose soul is dead, but their body is still alive. This mentally and emotionally damages the child and can result in unhealthy social relationships with others, a lack of interest and enthusiasm in work and society, and also it negatively impacts their economic development and other activities within a community. (Participant, Magic)

Since she is still a child and is not mature, she sees sex as an attack or assault not only on her body but also her soul and emotions. Also, early pregnancy

and sexual encounters can harm the child in many ways. For example, it can damage her genital or reproductive organs. Similarly, a child might experience shock or trauma from the sexual activity. Since she cannot escape or fight back, this can result in chronic and severe physical, psychological and emotional problems for her at a young age. (Participant, Amin)

The following two participants explained other aspects of emotional and physical harms resulting from EFCM, especially since a child may not have sufficient knowledge about social and sexual relationships, life, and marriage responsibilities and expectations. For example,

Since a child is not developed mentally or physically, she cannot have a healthy sexual relationship with their partner. As a result, any adult can easily manipulate or coerce the child. (Participant, Evista)

Also,

At this age (12 or 13 years of age), a child does not have much social or sexual knowledge about life and marriage. This lack of knowledge can result in severe and long-lasting problems throughout her life. (Participant, Naz)

2nd Theme: A child feels that everything in her life is forced

Nine participants discussed how everything in the child's life becomes unwanted or forced once a child is forced into relationship against her or his will. For example, here is what three participants expressed as the impacts of EFCM on a child who has not fully developed yet.:

When a child gets married under the age of 18, he or she is still not mature enough, mentally, physically and socially, which can have adverse effects on the well-being of the child. Child marriages put a lot of responsibilities on the children's shoulders. Plus, if marriage is forced, meaning that she does not want anything, but everything is imposed on her, this can result in chronic adverse effects or pressure on the child... Everything becomes forced from then on, whether it be with sex, relationships, or having children. It leaves adverse effects on the relationship between the two partners; they might not accept each other, and this can result in a separation or divorce. I think forced marriage is not an exciting topic, because it results in many problems for a family. Also, any born children become a product of the forced or unwanted relationship. Overall, anything that happens after the marriage becomes undesired whether it be having children, sex, or responsibilities, and so on. It results in chronic pressure, which can destroy the child. (Participant, Moe)

Similarly,

As soon as she gets married, she is expected to get pregnant and have a baby for her family. Otherwise, she is judged or humiliated for not having a baby. This expectation creates a lot of psychological and emotional pressure, such as stress and anxiety, for the girl. And, once she has a child, she might transfer the same pressure and negative emotions. (Participant, Kani)

Another participant talked about the long-term illnesses that may result from EFCM.

EFCM may result in long-term illnesses. Children are forced to engage in inappropriate sexual behaviours. Due to their bodies not being physically developed or having a sufficient amount of strength, girls can die from sex, or early pregnancy because their bodies cannot handle it. Their spinal cord also has a different shape as a result of premature sexual intercourse and childbearing. Also, these girls continuously lose their desire for sex and their life and marriage is destroyed entirely. (Participant, Hirish)

The conclusion here is that when a child, mainly a girl, is forced into a relationship, everything in her life (e.g., sex, having a child, forming a family) becomes forced or unwanted; she does not know what to do because she does not have sufficient social and sexual knowledge. In turn, these circumstances negatively impact her both psychologically and emotionally.

Emotional/Psychological Harms

3rd Theme: The girl is too young to be a mother

Another important theme that emerged in seven interviews was that a girl could not be a good future role model for people around her since she, as a minor, grew up in a relationship that was forced and did not gain sufficient positive life experiences. For example, the following two participants stated:

I think that there are many negative consequences of EFCM, not only for the child but also for the parents and community. The girl is still a child, with minimal knowledge or experience. At a very young age, she is forced into many responsibilities all at once. This situation can negatively impact the child, as she does not know how to interact around those close to her. She is also judged all the time by her family or community members, and this can negatively impact her confidence and self-esteem. (Participant, Kani)

Also,

*Through marriage, her role changes from a child into a married woman, who is expected to behave in a certain way and protect the family's honour.
(Participant, Kani)*

Similarly,

When a girl is forced into marriage, she does not have a decisive role in the family. Others easily judge her because she does not know how to behave or act the way they would like or prefer. This issue itself discourages her from engaging in the community and instead, she stays at home all the time away from others. It can also have detrimental effects on her social and emotional well-being. Although she is still a child, she is expected to behave like a married woman. She is supposed to know her role and responsibilities as a married wife and, overall, a child cannot handle this. Since she is unable to control the social pressure from the marriage, she may even commit suicide or try to harm herself. Also, if a child escapes or refuses their marriage, it can have negative consequences for girls and boys, because they are expected to agree with whatever the family imposes on them. (Participant, Naz)

Five participants believed that when a girl gets married, her role as a child turns into a married wife, who is expected to behave like an adult married woman, get pregnant, have a baby, and form a family. Nevertheless, since she is still a minor or child, she does not know how to act or behave in front of her new parents and siblings (in-laws); she does not understand the changes in her new life, including the new responsibilities and expectations, this confuses her entirely and has negative impacts on her life. Plus, the marriage puts a lot of undue responsibilities on the shoulders of children. At the same time, three participants further explained that whatever a girl does is often judged or questioned by the people around her, which can have a negative impact on her life. Therefore, based on the perceptions of five participants, to avoid judgments and stigma, a girl might prefer to stay home and isolate and disengage herself from the family and community and thus less likely able to change or escape her imposed relationship and seek help.

Overall, based on the perceptions of seven participants, a girl who is forced into marriage could not be a good role model for anyone around her, most importantly her offspring.

Social and Personal Harms upon Various Relationships

4th Theme: Child marriage as a harmful practice harming everyone, including the society

Based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants (13 out of 16), EFCM harms a variety of relationships, such as a relationship between children and their partners, as well as relationship between mothers and their offspring and/or the community. For example, the following two participants talked about the effects of EFCM on children's relationships with their parents, parents' feelings of guilt and regret, as well as children's internal negative emotions.

When children are forced into a marriage that they are unhappy with and always blame their parents. The child develops hatred towards their parents and often never forgives them even after their parents die. Negative emotions of hate and unhappiness negatively impacts the relationship between the child and their parents. Also, parents are often aware of their children's unhappiness and often live with negative emotions of regret and guilt until they die. When children are not happy with their life, they cannot be good friends, mothers, wives, husbands, or even a useful member of the community. The child always deals with an internal fire that continuously burns inside of her all the time until she dies, and she cannot escape from it. Also, a child cannot make friends and enjoy a happy social life and contribute to society because everything is forced upon her. Sometimes, some victims are resilient and may have a support system to help them survive or at least to fight against the abuse. But, over time, they might not be able to handle all the pressure and unfortunately decide to hurt themselves or commit suicide. (Participant, Solhy)

Also,

If the child is not raised appropriately, she will not be a good mother, either. That child is a product of an unwanted or forced relationship. She is guilty of that marriage and the child, but she is expected or forced to continue with the marriage. (Participant, Nav)

The majority of the participants felt that children are typically unhappy with their imposed marriage and blame their parents for forcing them to marry another person against their will. It is believed that children often never forgive their parents for these transgressions. On the other hand, when parents see that their children are unhappy with their life, this can strain the parent's relationship with their children and result in internalized emotions of guilt, shame, stress, and anxiety for the parents.

In addition, based on the perceptions of seven participants, although the child marriage is performed initially to improve the economic status of the child and family, this is not the case all the time. One participant explained that:

When a child, mainly girl, is forced into a marriage, first of all, she is less likely to find a job because she is still a child; second, the EFCM victim is less interested and enthusiastic to work and engage in a larger society because she is not happy with her life. All of this negatively impacts her economic growth or development (Participant, Mej)

According to above participant's response, when girls are forced into marriages against their will, they are less likely to work or find a job, but at the same time they heavily rely on their parents for economic support. The same participant further talked about how children's economic dependency reduces their self-esteem and confidence in their social and personal life. All of this can result in negative emotions of stress, anxiety, and depression for children. For example, two different participants believed that in extreme cases where a girl cannot handle extreme negative emotions of stress, she might commit suicide to protest against the marriage. One participant particularly discussed that sometimes at the beginning of the marriage, things seem to be stable and life is okay for the children, but child marriages in a long-term, results in severe negative economic, emotional, and mental distresses for the child and the family (Participant, Mej).

Human or Children Rights Violations and Harm

5th Theme: Children are robbed of their childhood

Based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants, when a child is forced into a marriage, her or his childhood is permanently stolen. For example, the following two participants talked about the vulnerability of children in EFCM.

Through EFCM, the girl's childhood is stolen, and she can no longer enjoy it. EFCM reduces the right to education and decision-making from the child. It eliminates their opportunities to engage in social life. Social connection or integration is also removed. Their free life is taken away from them, and a life based on force is imposed upon them. As a result, she does not feel good about herself and, thus, is less likely to engage in broader society or the community. I think this is a serious violation of their rights. (Participant, Pori)

Similarly,

Since she is still a child, she cannot work and pay for her own needs. Because of this, she must always rely on her husband or parents. She is not allowed to talk to any male stranger. She cannot speak louder in the house when male elders are present. She cannot have an opinion on something or engage in discussion with the family. She cannot decide on her own life. She loses the opportunity to enjoy her childhood, go to school, make her own decisions, or engage in the community among many other possibilities. All of this negatively impacts her independence, self-esteem, and confidence. (Participant, Kani)

Meanwhile, children must also rely on their new families for financial and social support.

For example, the following participant stated:

Economically, when a girl is forced into a marriage, she might not really be interested or enthusiastic in working or unable to work since she is too young. She tends to feel socially isolate herself from a larger community or society. This means that she is less engaged in work, society, and her personal life. This means that she has to rely on her parents for support. At the same time, these forms of isolation can damage her mentally and emotionally and can have negative impacts on her economic and personal growth or development. (Participant, Mej).

Based on the perceptions of all of the participants, child marriage is a harmful practice and is serious violations of children's fundamental human rights for numbers of reasons: the children being forced into marriage are still under development and thus these marriages impose significant harms upon their safety and health; the children cannot give a free and volunteer consent; since children are still minors and do not have much social, personal, and sexual life experiences and knowledge, and children could not make their personal decisions regarding their life, school, and employment. Also, children, mainly girls, are more likely to become a subject of interpersonal violence due to their age and gender vulnerabilities. Children are unable to escape or disobey, rather they must accept a life that was forced upon them. Finally, one participant particularly added that a forced relationship turns a girl into a slave where she is told all the time what to do and what not to do (Participant, Ben).

Preventive Measures for Responding to EFCM

With respect to preventive and responding measures, all of the participants acknowledged that EFCM is a concerning issue among members of Iranian communities, although they did not know how much of this problem exists among members of Iranian-Canadian community. Nevertheless, the participants acknowledged that EFCM needs serious attention by both governmental and non-governmental agencies, including the public, through Canadian intervention and prevention programs. More specifically, based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants, the practice of EFCM can be effectively prevented and responded nationally and internationally. The participants' responses were based collectively on Iran and Canada.

Education

1st Theme: Education is a key preventive measure

The needs for education was an overarching theme emerged in all of the interviews. Participants' responses included suggestions for the implementation of culturally appropriate and relevant educational sessions for children, parents, religious, and cultural leaders about the negative consequences of EFCM on all people, and not just children. For example, the following three participants talked about the importance of teaching Canadian children, parents, and the public about in the negative consequences of EFCM on children.

There is a need for education, education, education. In Canada, there is a need for educational sessions that help children to value their bodies, learn to say no, and not engage in sexual activity without their consent. There is also a need for education about sex at a very young age in school curriculums. Children also need to learn if someone touch them inappropriately and force them to do something, they can talk to someone about it. (Participant, Pori)

Also,

Parents need to understand the negative consequences of these marriages on their children. Education will allow parents to open their eyes and recognize that their decisions are wrong and destroy the lives of their children. When an individual is less educated, they are ignorant of everything around them. They also think the entire world lives like them. However, when parents start engaging with the broader community and gain further education and awareness, that is when they begin to realize the consequences of child marriage. The more education that we provide to those parents, the less likely these issues can happen. (Participant, Ben)

Similarly,

There is a need for educating the public about the negative consequences of this harmful practice. This form of marriage needs to be treated as a serious social issue, or disease, to the pre-modern culture. There is also a need for education and knowledge on the importance of individualism, self-determination and decision-making, and how this can positively impact their life and identity. (Participant, Abdul)

The majority of the participants in this study discussed the importance of educating children about the adverse effects of child marriage at a very young age. Three participants further suggested that any educational measure or sessions should also incorporate or engage

religious leaders who can act as mediators between the governmental and non-governmental agencies and the public. One key reason was that these religious leaders tend to interact with the community members on a daily or weekly basis. Given this, religious leaders can be key individuals for members of the community who are looking for guidance. Two participants further added that the religious leaders are highly respected and trusted within both cultural and religious communities, and thus can play a critical role in educating parents on how EFCM negatively impacts the life of children. This can be achieved not only through educational sessions, but also religious sermons. At the same time, these religious leaders utilize specific discourse to condemn EFCM and discourage the community members from carrying these harmful practices against their own children. One important sub-theme based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants was that the religious leaders have the potential and opportunity to educate the community members about EFCM and help parents to better understand the negative consequences of EFCM, and how these practices are not tolerated under any circumstance in Canada.

1st Sub-Theme: Changing and challenging social norms and attitudes condoning EFCM

Similarly, the majority of the participants also believed that it is also possible to change and challenge social norms that promote EFCM. For example, the following participant talked about the importance of education in changing the parents' mentalities and attitudes towards EFCM.

Parents need to understand that EFCM contradicts the essence of marriage, in which both people need to give consent voluntarily and freely. Parents need to realize that forcing their child to marry someone else does not bring happiness. Instead, it [such a force] has many adverse effects on the well-being and safety of the child. Education overtime will reduce the influence of cultural and religious norms and thus, parents will be less likely to comply

with them. Similarly, it can help parents to understand the harmful effects of forcing their child into an unwanted marriage. (Participant, Moe)

More specifically, the following participant talked about how religious leaders can play a key role in condemning EFCM and changing parents' attitudes and mentalities towards EFCM:

Parents, especially those who are very strict and conservative with complying with cultural and religious norms and traditions, often misinterpret religion and marriage. Based on what I know, in Islam, marriage is an agreement between two people who must completely agree and voluntarily and freely consent to marriage; and nothing should influence their decision or consent. Therefore, those who believe that they are acting on their Islamic culture and religion have a wrong interpretation of Islam. It is the responsibility of the religious leaders to help these parents understand that in a forced marriage, neither partner has given consent. Therefore, these parents need to know that they not only fail to follow their Islamic faith, but also what they do is actually against their Islamic values and beliefs and the essence of marriage, for which the free and volunteer consent of both partners is needed, in Islam. Religious leaders need to make the forced marriage of children against their underlying values and beliefs. They should make it [child marriage] religiously "haram" or forbidden and illegitimate. These leaders need to help people understand that children should have the right to leave an unwanted marriage without providing reasons or facing any negative consequences. (Participant, Solhy)

Another participant talked about the importance of criticizing or questioning harmful religious or cultural practices that promote violence within a particular doctrine, and that this could be achieved through public channels or tools, such as television, radio, or social media.

An issue like EFCM needs to be discussed publicly. People need to have opinions on why and how is happening. These things should not be hidden from the public. Everyone needs to actively engage to stop these issues in our communities. When we keep these issues hidden, we can not do anything about them. There is also need for criticizing or questioning those religious and cultural customs, traditions, and norms through engaging and incorporating religious and cultural leaders. These actors can play a crucial role in changing people's mentalities, in a way that they understand these actions are against human rights and dignity. These programs can happen on TV, radio, social media, or any other places that allow people to question and criticize these practices about members of a particular community. (Participant, Evista)

The above participant talked the sensitizing the issue of EFCM through public awareness-raising campaigns and programs through communication tools, such as social media, TV, and radio, in a way that the community members are aware of EFCM happening in their community. The same participant also talked about how religious figures can potentially play a key role of changing the people' mentalities and attitudes that condone the practice of EFCM.

Overall, thirteen participants believed that religious leaders could play a significant role in changing parents' attitudes, mindsets, and socials norms that promote violence against children, not just EFCM. This was seen as a viable solution for preventing and responding to EFCM among members of Iranian-Canadian in Canada. Additionally, four participants further believed that religious leaders could also help potential victims understand their rights and become more aware of available support resources and services in their community. Based on the perceptions of the majority of the participants, harmful practices, such as EFCM, needs to be combated and responded collectively through a collaborative and cooperative work between the community and the legal system in both Canada and Iran. In other words, there was a need for a society as a whole (e.g., legal, social, cultural, and religious institutions) to collectively condemn harmful practice of EFCM.

2nd Theme: Every marriage must be officially registered in Canada

Based on the perceptions of five participants, some marriages involving Canadian children might happen in or outside Canada, but parents might not see it necessary to officially register them in Canada. These participants further add that in some Iranian cultural or religious communities, when a marriage is religiously valid or legitimized by a religious institution and its leader in or outside Canada, parents may not find it necessary to register it officially, especially since the child marriage (under 16 years of age) is illegal in Canada. Parents may refuse to

register marriages under these circumstances as a way to avoid legal consequences. These five participants believed that this itself could be the key reason why parents might remove their children from Canada to another country to perform a marriage. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the state to identify un-registered or unreported marriages and ensure that every marriage is officially registered in Canada. The above participants also suggested that people, including religious leaders, must be legally obligated to report any incidences of child marriage that come to their attention, especially since solemnizing child marriage and forced marriage is illegal in Canada.

Finally, concerning parental consent for individuals aged 16 to 17 years of age under Canadian laws, two participants believed that Canadian judges need to ensure that the child's consent for marriage is entirely voluntary and free of external influence. Another participant believed that when parents are motivated through financial necessities or gains, they would be more likely to manipulate or convince their child to accept a marriage, even if the child did not entirely agree or consent the marriage. This suggests that the child's consent for a marriage can be influenced by the interests of parents and thus it is the responsibility of the Canadian authorities to determine the extent that consent for a marriage could be influenced by parents. Therefore, in these circumstances, the participants suggested that the parents' consent for a marriage of their children should be removed and instead, consent should be rendered by a judge, who is most likely to act in the best interests (such as confidentiality, security, decision-making on their own) of the child. As a result, this can eliminate covert notions of force, coercion, and/or pressures that are imposed on children by their parents.

A Brief Summary of Interview Findings

One common viewpoint presented by the majority of the participants in this study was that the victim of EFCM was referred to a girl between the age of 10 and 15 years of age. In other words, when, most of the participants, talked about a child involving EFCM, they refer to a girl between the age of 10 and 15 years of age although this definition was not suggested by the researcher. Another common viewpoint presented by the participants was that the definition of a child was related to the religious interpretation for the age of maturity or puberty, also known as “Bolookh”, which was determined by the personal discretion of an Islamic religious leader, known as “Akhoond,” or “Molla” in Iran. The third common viewpoint with respect to the definition of EFCM presented by the participants in this study was that EFCM was defined as either early or forced marriage of children. The fourth common viewpoint presented by the participants in this study was that a decision for marriage of children was mainly made by male figures, usually the father or male guardian, within the household and thus a role of children in a decision for marriage and children’s consent was hugely limited and ignored by their parents. Finally, in the views of the majority of the participants, most early marriages involve some degree of force or coercion, which also nullifies child’s consent.

Regarding factors contributing to EFCM, EFCM was based on various socio-economic, cultural, religious, and legal factors among members of the Iranian-Canadian community. Compliance with cultural and religious norms and customs was the most prevalent factor in EFCM since EFCM was thought to be a collective cultural and religious custom among various factions of Iranian cultures and/or religions. Also, socioeconomic factors, such as parents’ feelings of insecurity and fear about the future of their children alongside economic disadvantage or poverty were other common themes. Finally, the lack of appropriate legal actions by the Iranian government likewise played a role in EFCM.

With respect to long-lasting adverse effects, all of the participants in the study acknowledged that EFCM results in long-lasting physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, and social damage to the safety and well-being of a child. One common theme discussed by many participants was that as a result of EFCM, a child become entirely dysfunctional, socially and emotionally. Another related theme discussed by four participants was that EFCM victims, mainly girls become like the 'walking dead.' The third common theme among the majority of the participants was that everything becomes forced or coerced in the victim's life. More specifically, the girl can no longer be in the role of child, despite still being a young girl. Few participants discussed that the girl's new role as a young mother is extremely confusing for her and thus, she cannot be a positive future role model for those around them. The fourth common emerged among the view of few participants was that EFCM affects society as well. Finally, the victims' childhood was stolen and permanently destroyed and thus EFCM was a serious violation of children's fundamental human rights.

All of the participants acknowledged that EFCM is a concerning issue among members of Iranian community and requires serious attention; nevertheless, the participants did not know how much of this problem still exists among members of Iranian-Canadians. The participants identified some solutions for effectively prevent and respond to the practice of EFCM: first, there was a need for age -appropriate and -relevant educational sessions for anyone, including children, parents, religious and cultural leaders, as well as frontline service providers and police officers, who has a stake in the practice of EFCM. Second, there was not only a need for sensitizing the issue of EFCM among members of Iranian-Canadians, but also need for challenging and changing mentalities and social norms that condone EFCM. Third, there was also a need for identifying un-registered and/or unreported child marriages and ensuring that any

marriage must be officially registered in Canada. Fourth, it was suggested by few participants that parental consent should no longer be allowed and instead the decision should be rendered by a judge in order to eliminate covert notions of force or coercion by parents upon children. In sum, reflecting on the three research questions in this study, all of the participants in this study believed that EFCM was a concerning issue which requires serious attention among members of the Iranian community. All of the participants acknowledged the need for discussing, preventing, and responding to EFCM in Canada. All of the participants made suggestions on how to effectively respond to and prevent EFCM by improving the EFCM victims' chances for seeking help and reporting violence as well as their chances for accessing support services in Canada.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Discussions, Analyses, and Recommendations

This qualitative study, through 16 face-to-face interviews with adult members of the Iranian-Canadian community in Greater Vancouver, examined the practice of EFCM referring to either early or forced marriage involving children in formal marital unions, mainly made or decided by the families. This study examined three main research questions: 1) whether members of the Iranian-Canadian community understand some of the contributing factors of EFCM in their community; 2) whether members of Iranian-Canadians acknowledge that there is a need to prevent and respond to EFCM in Canada; and, 3) whether members of Iranian-Canadian community are willing to confront or take action against EFCM and, if yes, how. This section particularly includes the researcher's interpretations and analyses of the interview findings presented in terms of various themes, subthemes, and sub-concepts. It is important to note that across many interviews, participants expressed similar viewpoints to the themes and perceptions

that I identified in the existing literature abroad regarding EFCM. These similarities were observed in the core findings, implications, and recommendations pertinent to EFCM.

The results of this study supported that the practice of EFCM was mainly carried out in compliance with cultural and religious beliefs, customs, and traditions among members of Iranian traditional community. This was also supported by the perceptions of existing literature and several reports conducted by the UN and its related agencies. More specifically, EFCM was carried out through customary practices, known as “*jin-bi-jin*” or bride exchange as well as “*khoonbaha*” or “blood price” among segments of Iranian communities. Two participants shared the same viewpoints that the practice of “*jin-bi-jin*” was often carried out between two poor families who are unable to afford the costs for wedding expenses and thus who make an agreement or arrangement to marry off or exchange their daughter for their son with another family, without providing any additional wedding costs. Based on the perceptions of these two participants, the practice of “*jin-bi-jin*” could also occur among two rich families, who do not have financial difficulties, but have a desire to strengthen their ties and relationships with each other.

The results of this study add to the existing literature by showing that EFCM was also carried out through a customary practice of “*khoonbaha*” among members of Iranian Kurdish families or tribes. Three participants shared the same viewpoints that the practice of “*khoonbaha*” was referred to a situation in which a girl was used as a strategic tool for ending an ongoing conflict between two families or tribes, especially if one of the parties has lost a family or community member as a result of that conflict. In other words, through “*khoonbaha*,” a girl, as a blood price, is forced to marry a son, brother, uncle, or even the father of the injured person. Both the participants in this study as well as many researchers shared the same viewpoints that

customary practices, such as “*jin-bi-jin*” and “*khoonbaha*” are both financially or economically, as well as culturally motivated, driven, and tolerated. Under both practices, young girls are exchanged for financial means or used as tools to strengthen families’ relationships, or to end conflicts between families under both practices. These practices also aim to control the social and sexual life of the young girls within a particular community and thus can be considered as a form of gender-based practices or form of discrimination and patriarchy against girls within a particular community. This was also supported by the existing literature.

Similarly, the perceptions of the participants in this study supported the notion of EFCM was carried out by parents to prevent children, mainly girls, from engaging in social and sexual relationships outside marriage resulting in shame or embarrassment for the family and often for the community. This was also supported by existing literature that forced marriage of children (Kopelman, 2016) and adults (Bendriss, 2008) is mainly carried out to protect or defend the family honour among members of the Middle Eastern, North African, and Southeast Asian communities. On the other hand, the participants believed that if a family living in an Islamic religious and cultural community fails to comply with cultural and religious expectations and norms, non-compliance may result in the social or cultural isolation or exclusion of some family members or an entire family within a community. One key implication here is that the parents’ decision for marriage of their children is influenced by the pressure from the community members, such as local and religious community elders and leaders, for compliance with cultural and religious norms and customs. This would seem to confirm by the previous literatures (Alinia, 2013; Nasrullah et al., 2014b).

Many participants in this study shared the same viewpoints that Iranian-Canadian families, which are less integrated or engaged with Canadian culture and values, are more likely

to adhere to Iranian cultural and religious norms, and are easily influenced by religion and/or culture; and consequently, are more likely to perform the practice of EFCM against their children. This was also supported by two pieces of Iranian literatures (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006; Tremayne, 2006). However, four different participants indicated that although the community pressure for complying with cultural and religious values is relevant in EFCM, this pressure, both culturally and economically, is less influential for Iranian-Canadian parents and their children living in Canada than those living in Iran. These four participants believed that this is because Iranian-Canadians are economically and culturally well-established and integrated into the Canadian culture and values.

The results of this study also support that although EFCM (*note: child marriage and forced marriage, separately*) is illegal in Canada, many young Canadian girls can be removed by their parents from Canada to a different country where this practice is tolerated in order to perform forced marriage. This notion was also supported by the existing literature that family members might be taken abroad by their parents or legal guardians for the purpose of performing forced marriage against them (Bendriss, 2008; Gill & Brah, 2014; Kopelman, 2016), and are sometimes held outside the country where they were living until, they become adults (Hester et al., 2007). One key implication is that it is very challenging for Canadian officials to not only effectively respond to EFCM, but also to protect Canadian children who are removed by their parents from Canada.

Another important finding based on the perceptions of the participants in this study was that marriage, including child marriage, is validated and approved by an Islamic religious leader in Iran; also, the parents and/or the new married couple often may not see it necessary to officially register their marriage or the marriage of their children validated and approved by the

religious leaders. This notion was also supported by the analyses of two studies conducted in Iran (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006; Tremayne, 2006). Similarly, the majority of the participants in this study believed that Iranian religious leaders are not only permitted to determine whether a child is mature enough for marriage, but also to solemnize or validate the marriage under religious, and/or legal, standards in Iran. One key implication is that there is a need for identification of unreported child marriages against Canadian children that are permitted by religious leaders but are never legally registered in or outside Canada. One recommendation is that all marriages involving Canadian citizens need to be formally registered, whether it happens inside or outside Canada. Another recommendation is that since Islamic religious leaders are religiously authorized to validate marriages, they need to be very cautious with respect to the age and consent of the child when solemnizing a marriage in Canada. The last recommendation is that religious leaders themselves also need to become aware of harmful practices, such as EFCM, happening in their community and become educated and trained about how to effectively respond to these issues in Canada (Bendriss, 2008). Overall, religious leaders need to be extra cautious when validating and solemnizing a marriage in Canada.

Both the participants in this study and existing literature shared the same viewpoints that religious leaders within cultural and religious communities have significant influences on the community members and how parents perceive and think about EFCM; and thus, can play a key role in changing and influencing the perceptions of the community members and ultimately helping to prevent and end violence against children. This notion was supported in an article that religious leaders have a unique position and have more opportunities in communities and through this, they can play a key role in condemning and responding to harmful traditional practices, including EFCM, within their own community, especially since religious leaders are

highly accepted and respected by their own community members, many of whom turn to those leaders for direction, guidance, and support (Lai-Smith, 2016, p. 15). One key recommendation is that Canadian officials should take advantage of religious leaders' standing or position within cultural and religious communities and incorporate them as potential practical tools for educating the members of the general public, including children and parents, about harms associated with harmful practice of EFCM. The role of religious leaders in effectively responding to violence within their own community was supported by several researchers (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009; Lai-Smith, 2016).

In addition, the results of this study also confirm that forced marriage of children results in isolation of children, socially and personally. Many participants in this study shared the same viewpoints that victims of EFCM prefer to stay at home all the time and are less likely to engage in a larger community or society to avoid shame and embarrassment from peers or other family members. As a result, the children victims are less likely to seek help and become aware of available support services in community. At the same time, isolation negatively impact their health and wellbeing. In addition to voluntary form of isolation discussed above, IPPF (2006) highlighted a different form of isolation in which forced marriage victims are intentionally cut off from a larger community/society by their parents or husbands. This occurs when female victims are disallowed or prohibited by their husbands from associating or talking to anyone outside their families.

One key implication is that responding to EFCM becomes very challenging when the victim is isolated, whether through force or voluntarily because nobody becomes aware of their situation and nobody is able to help the child. This becomes even more challenging when a child is taken by their parents to another country (Kopelman, 2016). The overall message based on the

viewpoints of the participants and researchers is that isolation undermines the safety, health, and well-being of children and most importantly, isolation (in any form) reduces the EFCM victims' chances of seeking help, reaching support services, reporting the violence perpetrated against them, thus putting them at even greater risk of harm.

One key recommendation is that any intervention aiming to end violence against children need to focus on improving the victim-survivors' chances for seeking help and reporting violence (Gill & Harrison, 2016). At the same time, the children need to understand the importance of seeking help (p. 455). It was highlighted in two reports that frontline service providers can play a key role educating parents and children, on forced marriage and its harmful effects on individuals, through public awareness-raising campaigns and information sessions and dialogues on social media and TV programs and thus encouraging victims to reach out to their community for support (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009; UNFPA & UNICEF, 2017). At the same time, frontline service providers need to be trained for cultural awareness, integrity, and sensitivity to avoid labelling of a particular community and unjust interventions (Bendriss, 2008) and better recognize risk factors or conditions that might increase the degree of risk that the victim might experience (Roberts et al., 2014). One key recommendation here is that there is a need for adequate support and protection services designed by—and for— immigrant communities aiming to improve the victims' chances of seeking help and reporting violence (Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Pan et al., 2006). Importantly, the perceptions of the participants and that of existing literature support that the majority of the victims of EFCM are young girl; therefore, I highly recommend that any intervention must engage young females, who can speak about their experiences and stories and stand against violence, collectively.

In addition to core findings, there were three other interesting findings from the study. The first interesting finding was that although all of the participants in this study were Canadian citizens or permanent residents, when they were talking about the effectiveness of the laws in preventing EFCM, they mainly discussed the Iranian laws, rather than Canadian ones. Therefore, not all of the participants' responses regarding the legal prevention of EFCM were applicable to Canada; rather, participants' responses were based on Iran and Canada. Nevertheless, this research only focused on those findings that were applicable in Canada in this chapter. This suggests that whether the participants intentionally did not discuss or were unfamiliar with Canadian laws, there is a need for familiarizing members of Iranian-Canadian community with Canadian laws regarding early marriage and forced marriage of children, both of which are now illegal in Canada. The second interesting finding was that although this study was not based on a particular faith, majority of the participants (13 out of 16 participants) in this study used Islamic laws and values as examples when discussing religious laws, norms, and traditions, rather than laws or principles of other religions, such as Yezidis, Alevi's, Yarsanis, Assyrians, and Christians. One implication based on this finding is that since all of the participants were also Iranians, they were mostly familiar and aware of the Iranian laws, which were mainly based on Islamic Sharia laws rather than other religions in Iran and that is why participants were only familiar with Islamic laws in Iran. The last interesting finding was that when participants talked about the victims of EFCM, they mainly referred to a child as a girl between 10 to 15 years of age although this was not specifically asked by the researcher.

Finally, the results of this study also suggest that three dominant stakeholders play a crucial role in effectively preventing and responding to EFCM in Canada: (a) young adolescents, (b) parents and the community, and (c) government and non-government agencies (i.e. police,

child protection agencies, social workers, and frontline service providers. This was also supported by the existing literature that preventing and responding to harmful practices against children requires collective and collaborative partnerships, efforts, and advocacy from governments, professionals, and the community, including youths, in order to work together to provide community- and family- based support and interventions (Bendriss, 2008; Kouyaté, 2009; Lai-Smith, 2016; Svevo-Cianci et al., 2011).

Future Research

One key recommendation based on the results of this study is that there is need for more statistical and qualitative to better understanding EFCM and determine whether and to what extent EFCM is a social phenomenon in Canada. It is also recommended that the future research should assess local and international intervention programs aimed to eliminate EFCM along with suggestions for best practices. For example, Canadian researchers can evaluate the effectiveness of Canadian laws before and after early and forced marriage became a law in 2015 in Canada. Another recommendation for future research is to examine what has been done to discourage and prevent parents from marrying off their children at a young age in Canada. Future research can also look at the degree of cooperation and collaboration between various Canadian agencies, most importantly, the police, community, and frontline service providers. Herein, there is also a need for open lines of communication between the police and civil society on how to develop effective strategies for responding to and preventing EFCM in Canada.

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Statutes

Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act, S.C. 2015, c. 29.

Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c. C – 46.

Civil Marriage Act, S.C. 2005, c. 33.

Appendices

Appendix A – Interview Questions

- 1) What do you know about child marriage?
 - a. Can you tell me about child marriage in your community?
- 2) What do you consider as forced marriage?
 - a. What do you know about forced marriage?
- 3) In your opinion, what are some of the positive and/or negative consequences (economic, social, legal, mixed) of child marriage for young girls and boys in a community?
- 4) What do you consider to be positive and/or negative consequences for parents who marry off their children at early age in a community?
- 5) In your opinion, what are some of the positive and/or negative consequences (economic, social, legal, mixed) of forced marriage for young girls and boys in a community?
- 6) What do you consider to be as positive and/or negative consequences for parents who force their children to get married with another person without the child's consent or permission in a community?
- 7) Can you provide examples of social, cultural, or religious factors that play a role in child marriage?
- 8) Can you provide examples of social, cultural, or religious factors that play a role in forced marriage?
- 9) In your opinion, what responses do you suggest could prevent early marriage?
- 10) Is there any of those responses already practiced in your community?
- 11) Do you have any question for me?

This concludes the interview. Thank you for your time and contribution to this research. You will now have a chance to review your responses with me and let me know if you disagree with what I have gathered, understood, or interpreted.

Once the research is completed, I will share the results and findings with you via e-mail or hard copy if you wish.

Thank you so much again,

Azad Vizheh

Appendix B – E-mail to Participants

Dear Member of Our Community,

My name is Azad Vizheh and I am a graduate student under the supervision of Professor Yvon Dandurand and Dr. Hayli Millar in the Master of Arts Criminal Justice program at the University of the Fraser Valley. I am currently working on a research project entitled as “Prevention of and Response to Early and Forced Child Marriage Canada.” For this research, I need to interview an adult (above 19 years old) Iranian community member to gain their perspectives, thoughts, and opinions about early and forced marriage of children (19 years old and under) in Canada.

I want to ask you if you can share my contact information and a description of my research with any Iranian community member, who have been in Canada for more than one year and who might be interested in participating in this study and ask them to contact me directly if they like. I want to inform you in advance that their participation as well as all the information that they provide during the interview will be kept private and protected from anyone else, except the student researcher Azad Vizheh. Nobody will know who agreed to participate in this research, except Azad Vizheh. If you are willing to help me, please share my contact information and a description of my research with any Iranian community member, staff and student, who might be interested in taking a part in this research.

Interviews, which may take about an hour, will be conducted in Farsi or Kurdish, depending on the language preferred by the participants.

I will appreciate your help.

Sincerely,

Azad Vizheh,

Graduate Student, University of the Fraser Valley

E-mail : [REDACTED]

Appendix C - Certificate of Human Research Ethics Board Approval



Certificate of Human Research Ethics Board Approval

Master's Supervisor Yvon Dandurand	Department Criminology & Criminal Justice	Protocol # 1014C-17
Master's Student Azad Vizheh		
Title of Project Prevention of and Response to Early and Forced Marriage of Children in Canada		
Sponsoring/Funding Agency None		
Institution(s) where research will be carried out. University of the Fraser Valley		
Review Date: 28-Sept-17	Approval Date: 20-Oct-17	Approval Term: 20-Oct-17 - 19-Oct-18
Certification: <i>The protocol describing the above named project has been reviewed by the UFV Human Research Ethics Board, and the procedures were found to be in compliance with accepted guidelines for ethical research.</i>  Michael Gaetz, Chair, Human Research Ethics Board <i>NOTE: This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above-noted term provided there are no changes in the procedures or criteria given.</i> <i>If the project will go beyond the approval term noted above, an extension of approval must be requested.</i>		

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Appendix D – Consent Form

Part A Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Azad Vizheh, a graduate student in the Criminal Justice Program at the University of Fraser Valley. I am conducting a qualitative study as a requirement for completing a Master of Arts Degree in Criminal Justice at the University of the Fraser Valley. I am inviting you to participate in the following research, which mainly focuses on the prevention and response to early and forced marriage of children in Canada. I am working under the supervisions of Professor Yvon Dandurand and Dr. Hayli Millar.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw your consent at any time before data is compiled, during the interview, or after the interview has ended. During the interview process, you will have the right to refuse to answer any questions. Prior to data compilation or after the interview has ended, you may request to withdraw your participation by either contacting the student researcher or his supervisors, Professor Yvon Dandurand or Dr. Hayli Millar to confirm your withdrawal. All the associated records of the interviews will be destroyed as soon as I have listened and confirmed the information within 6 hours after the interview is conducted. All the raw data will be destroyed after seven years after the defence of master's major project. Only written description notes will be kept after the study is completed. Once data are compiled and coded through a data organizing program, it will be impossible to link any data to you personally. Plus, throughout the research, your identity will be protected by using pseudonyms. You have the right to be interviewed in the language of your preference, either English, Farsi, or Kurdish as you wish.

Purpose/Objectives of the Study

This study will help us understand how this issue is perceived in the Iranian community and identify some culturally appropriate and acceptable ways of responding to and preventing these forms of violence against children. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the literature body and assist in preventing and responding to early and forced marriage of children in Canada.

Procedures Involved in the Research

I am hoping to have an hour of your time to discuss the social and cultural dimensions of early and forced marriage of children referring to anyone under 19 years of age. Currently, Canadian children, both girls and boys, may be removed by their parents or relatives from Canada and forced to marry another person chosen by their parents outside Canada for various reasons.

I also hope to seek your viewpoint on what might be the most culturally appropriate and effective ways of preventing and responding to this problem in Canada. *Please do not* discuss any actual instances of a child marriage or forced marriage, which you may be personally aware of, either about yourself or anyone else. In case, if you make any reference to a specific incidence or instance of violence against children, either about yourself or anyone else, during the interview, I will stop the interview and none of the information collected from the interview will be included in this study. You should also know that I have a duty to report any specific instances of child abuse. Please do not make any reference to any actual incidences of violence against children, in which you or anyone else may have engaged. You are asked to simply provide general information including your thoughts and opinions about early marriage and forced marriage of children rather than making a specific reference to actual incidences of violence against children.

Your perspective on early and forced marriage can assist this study in understanding how this issue is currently perceived in Canada, its contributing factors or origins, and finally, what needs to be acted upon for the Canadian victims and potential victims of early or forced marriage.

The interview will be approximately an hour. Interviews will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location that both you and I are comfortable with, and which offers privacy. If you decide to participate in this study, I will be audio recording the interview. All the audio-record of the interviews will be destroyed as soon as after I have listened and confirmed information within 6 hours after the interview is conducted. Nevertheless, only written description notes will be kept after the study is completed. This will allow the researcher to refer to the interview and have a fresh perspective at the interview data for further clarifications. The digital records of the interview will be protected in encrypted software, and only the researcher will have access to the files. Once the study is completed, these records will be destroyed. Permission will also be sought to contact you after the interview for follow-ups or clarifications. If you agree to be re-contacted, this will be done through e-mail or telephone. I am happy to share the transcript with you and get their feedback as you wish. Plus, you will also be offered a copy of the final major project.

Potential Benefits and Risks

There is no monetary benefit for participation. This research may or may not benefit you directly; nevertheless, I think that it will assist community members, future researchers, and policymakers in preventing and responding to early and forced marriage of children.

Due to the nature of the topic, if you feel uncomfortable, the interview will be discontinued and all the collected and recorded information about you will be destroyed

immediately there. If you feel uncomfortable any time during the interview, I am more than happy to provide you with contact information of BC Crisis Line (Phone= 604-872-3311).

I will make every effort possible to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the information and opinions that you agree to share with me as a part of this study.

Voluntary Participation, Confidentiality, and Privacy

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. During the interview, you may refuse to answer any question or part of a question that you are uncomfortable answering or discussing. Furthermore, you may interrupt or stop the interview, or withdraw your participation from the study at any time during the interview or after the interview has ended. You may request your withdrawal from the study by either contacting the student researcher, Azad Vizheh or his supervisors, Professor Yvon Dandurand or Dr. Hayli Millar. You also can share my contact information and description of my research with other people who might be interested in participating in this research and ask them to directly contact me if they are interested in.

Confidentiality

I will take all the necessary measures to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the information that will be collected from the interview. As mentioned above, participants will be identified through pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The interview will be discontinued at anytime if you make a reference to an actual incidence of violence against children that either you or anyone else may have involved. If this happens, none of the data collected from the interview will be included at all, rather all the collected data will be destroyed immediately here. Records will be stored in a password-protected file and only the student researcher, Azad Vizheh will have access to the recorded files. Finally, the researcher will not share or disclose any information that may lead to the determination of your identity.

The audio-record of the interviews will be destroyed as soon as I have listened and confirmed the information within 6 hours after the interview is conducted. All the data that would allow the identification of the participants will permanently be destroyed on or before April 30/2024, seven years after the defence of master's major project. This is also a time for disposal of all documents that might lead to the identification of participants in this study. Only written description notes will be kept after the study is completed.

If you need further information about this study before you decide to participate, you may contact me by e-mail at: [REDACTED].

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Board of the University of the Fraser Valley. If you have any other questions or concerns about the study, the researcher or concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, you may contact the Ethics Officer at 604-557-4011 or Research.Ethics@ufv.ca.

Part B

Consent Form

By signing below, I agree to participate in the study titled, "Prevention of and Response to Early and Forced Marriage of Children in Canada."

I have read the information presented in the informed consent form provided by Azad Vizheh and the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of the Fraser Valley. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive any additional details.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that confidentiality and/or anonymity of all results will be preserved. I understand that if I have any questions about the study or if I wish to withdraw from this study at anytime after the interview

has ended. I can contact Mr. Azad Vizheh at: [REDACTED] or his supervisor,
Professor Yvon Dandurand at: Yvon.Dandurand@ufv.ca.

If I have any concerns regarding my rights or welfare as a participant in this research
study, I can contact the UFV Ethics Officer at 604-557-4011 or Research.Ethics@ufv.ca.

Your signature below indicates that you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Once signed, you will be able to keep a copy of this consent form.

Researcher name _____

Signature