

Fewer forced marriages among immigrant women and daughters of immigrants

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Are forced marriages common in France? Are their numbers falling or increasing? Who is concerned by these marriages? Until now, no recent quantitative data were available to answer these questions, but this knowledge gap has now been filled thanks to the Trajectories and Origins survey conducted by the French National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). Christelle Hamel presents its initial findings on forced marriage among immigrant women and the daughters of immigrants.

What is meant by “forced marriage”? How can the absence of consent be defined? Marriage may either be voluntary or the consequence of pressure exerted through social norms or through psychological, material or even physical coercion on the part of the family [1]. The absence of consent is difficult to delimit: are all arranged marriages necessarily unwanted and non-consensual? In practice, there is a continuum between desired marriages and those contracted under duress. Three levels of consent can nonetheless be defined on the basis of the Trajectories and Origins survey (see Box).

The first corresponds to “freely consented unions”. The respondent clearly states that the marriage was desired, even if initiated by the spouse. At this first level, 97% of marriages are described as a decision taken jointly by both partners. Alongside informal unions, these marriages represent the category of “freely consented unions”.

The opposite category of unions are “non-consensual marriages”, a term that is preferred over “forced marriage” since the survey did not ask questions about

physical violence. This level comprises unwanted marriages, contracted on the spouse’s initiative or resulting from family pressure.

The intermediate level covers less clear-cut situations, combining acceptance and constraint, with no clear indication as to whether the person truly wished to marry. The persons concerned have accepted a marriage either initiated by the family or proposed by the spouse, but would have preferred to marry later. This category thus covers a wide range of situations where the marriage is accepted, but under circumstances where individual choice may be strongly influenced or even constrained by the spouse, the family or by the weight of social norms in general. In other words, the union takes place without “free and full consent”.

◆ Fewer non-consensual marriages

In France, non-consensual marriages are more common among immigrant women than among the daughters of immigrants, accounting for 4% of marriages among the former and 2% among the latter (figures for the 26-50 age group).

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Among immigrant women aged 51-60, 9% were married against their will and 13% were married without their full consent, making a total of 22% of women whose decision to marry was not based on purely individual choice (Table).⁽¹⁾ In two-thirds of cases, the marriages took place in the country of origin, before migration to France. Among this generation, almost one in four immigrant women has experienced an arranged marriage, in many cases through a request submitted to the parents of the future bride, while the other three-quarters (78%) were able to choose their husband themselves. Although not disappearing altogether, non-consensual marriage is less common among the youngest women: in the 26-30 age group, only 2% were married against their will (and 7% probably without their full consent).

Among daughters of immigrants, most of whom marry in France, only half as many report a non-consensual marriage as immigrant women of the same age. At ages 26-30, only 1% were married against their will, and 3% without their full consent.⁽²⁾ So forced marriage is rare among the daughters of immigrants, as already suggested by previous research [2, 4].

What about the rest of the French population? Some 10% of marriages concluded during the interwar years and 5% of marriages concluded before 1960 involved the intervention of third parties who deliberately organized a meeting between the future spouses [5]. This practice has practically disappeared in recent decades, especially now that marriage is generally preceded by a long period of cohabitation. The Trajectories and Origins survey corroborates these findings: within the mainstream population, 5% of women aged 51-60 mentioned family influence on their choice of spouse, versus none at all among the under-30s.

◆ Educational level is a key factor

Non-consensual marriage is often associated with a low level of education, both among the parents and the brides themselves. Among immigrant women married against their will or without their full consent, 40% had parents with no schooling, versus just 20% among women who chose their husband freely. But there are numerous exceptions: 20% of immigrant women who married without their full consent had parents with a high-school diploma or a degree in higher education (versus 37% of women who married freely).

The same observations apply to the daughters of immigrants: almost 30% of those married against their will or without their full consent had parents with no schooling, compared with 11% among women who chose their husband themselves. Here too, the parents' education does not protect against non-consensual

(1) In two-thirds of cases, the persons married against their will are women. But 3% of immigrant men aged 51-60 are also concerned by this problem. However, around fifty qualitative interviews revealed that, unlike women, men are not subjected to physical violence and their subsequent social trajectories are largely unaffected.

(2) Girls sent back by force to marry in their parents' home country could not be surveyed, resulting in a slight under-estimation of the share of non-consensual marriages. The proportion nonetheless remains well below that observed for immigrant women of the same age.

Table - Degree of women's consent to their first marriage by age and migration status

Age in 2008 (years)	Never in a union (%)	Ever in a union (%)			Total
		Freely consented union*	Marriage without full consent	Non-consensual marriage	
Immigrant woman					
51-60	3	78	13	9	100
41-50	5	83	12	5	100
31-40	8	86	9	5	100
26-30	23	91	7	2	100
Daughter of immigrants**					
41-50	9	94	4	2	100
31-40	13	94	4	2	100
26-30	29	96	3	1	100
Woman in mainstream population***					
51-60	6	90	5	5	100
41-50	7	93	4	3	100
31-40	10	96	3	1	100
26-30	15	98	2	0	100

Notes: * includes marriages contracted freely and cohabiting unions; ** for immigrants' daughters, the survey sample is limited to the 18-50 age groups; *** neither immigrant nor daughter of immigrants.

Interpretation: Among immigrant women living in France in 2008, 23% of those aged 26-30 have never lived in a union. Among those who have cohabited or married, the first union is the result of a free choice in 91% of cases, but 7% agreed to marry under circumstances where their individual preferences may have been strongly influenced, and 1% married against their will in response to family pressure.

Source: *Trajectories and Origins survey, INED-INSEE, 2008.*

(C. Hamel, *Population & Societies*, no. 479, INED, June 2011)

marriage, since in a quarter of such cases, at least one parent had a high-school diploma (30% for women who chose freely).

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the bride's educational level plays a role, since early marriage may put an end to her schooling. Immigrant women married against their will have no qualifications in 53% of cases, and the daughters of immigrants in 34% of cases, a very high proportion for women who have grown up in France. The proportion is lower in case of marriage without full consent: 18% of immigrants' daughters in this situation are unqualified compared with 12% of those who marry freely.

◆ Influence of country of origin

In certain countries of origin, singlehood is frowned upon and premarital sexuality is prohibited (in some cases by law), so informal unions are not possible. This is the case in Turkey, North Africa and Sahelian Africa, and women from these countries are at highest risk of non-consensual marriage, with rates ranging from 11% to 15% in the generation aged 41-60 in 2008, and from 4% to 8% in the 26-40 age group (Figure). At the same ages, immigrants' daughters are less exposed, with the notable exception of female Turkish immigrants, for whom the rate is similar.

For women from countries where marriage has been declining in recent decades – Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), Europe, West and Central Africa – the situation is different. In this group, the proportion of non-consensual marriages is below 7% for immigrant women aged 41-60 and 3% for women aged 26-40. Around half of the daughters of immigrants from these countries have lived in informal unions and fewer than 2% are married against their will.

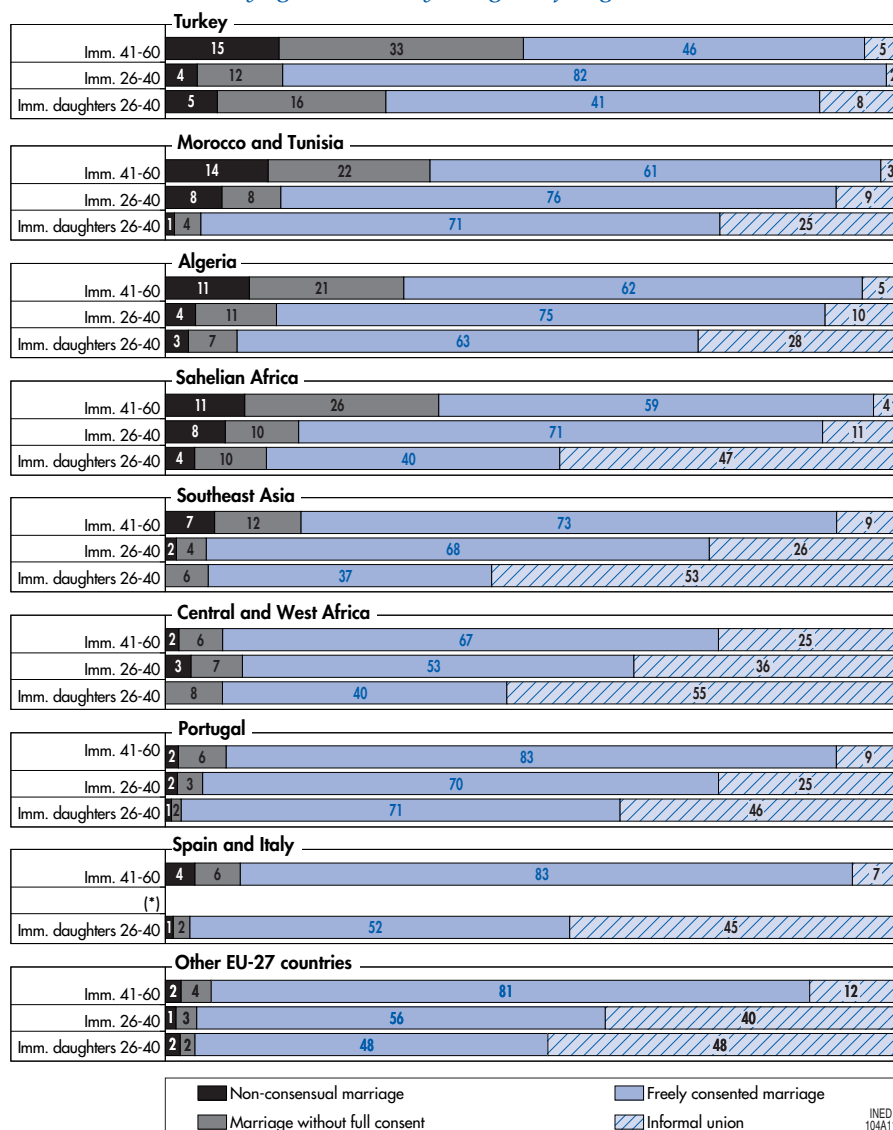
◆ Hasty marriages for immigrant women

Among immigrant women, the circumstances of non-consensual marriage are similar from one generation to the next. Women who enter such marriages do so at an early age: 28% were minors on their wedding day, and half were already married at age 19. The courting period is short: 48% marry within 3 months of first meeting their future husband, and 4% only meet him after the marriage has taken place. These cases correspond to weddings celebrated by proxy in the absence of the bride, a legally authorized practice in certain countries. Moreover, 8% of women married against their will report experience of severe parental abuse before age 18, versus just 2% of those who married freely.

But early non-consensual marriage among immigrant women is rarely linked to an extra-marital pregnancy: only 5% already had a child before they married, and 10% had one in the year of their marriage. These low rates are similar to those reported by women who married freely. Virginity at marriage is still the norm.

Last, three-quarters of immigrant women who married against their will met their husband “at a relative’s home” or at a “family party”, a fact which suggests that the marriage was arranged by the family. This is also the case for two-thirds of women who were married without their full consent, versus just 30% of those who chose their husband themselves. In 87% of non-consensual marriages, the husband is an immigrant, more rarely the son of an immigrant (2%), and in other cases a member of the mainstream population (11%). For women who are married without their full consent, the proportion of husbands who are members of the mainstream population is doubled (23%).

Figure - Type of first union and degree of consent to marriage of immigrant women and daughters of immigrants by age and country or region of origin (%)



Note (*): The number of immigrant women from Spain and Italy aged below 40 is too small to give an estimate.

Source: *Trajectories and Origins survey, INED-INSEE, 2008.*

(C. Hamel, *Population & Societies*, no. 479, INED, June 2011)

◆ Often linked to unplanned pregnancy for immigrants' daughters

The circumstances of non-consensual marriage are quite different for the daughters of immigrants. Half as many are under 18 when they marry (11%), and age at marriage is generally higher, though still early. Among immigrants' daughters married against their will, half were already married at age 20, while those who married freely did so at age 23 on average. Hasty marriages (celebrated within three months of the spouses' first meeting) are half as frequent as for immigrant women (24% versus 48%), and marriages before the first meeting are very rare (1% versus 4%). But unlike immigrant women, daughters of immigrants are frequent victims of family violence: 21% of those married against their will experienced violence before age 18, versus 4% of those who married freely.

Premarital pregnancies are much more common than among immigrant women. They explain the family pressure exerted in half of cases: 22% of immigrants' daughters married against their will already had a child at the time of marriage, and 35% had one in the same year (probably conceived before marriage), making a total of 57%, compared with 27% among women who married freely.

Box

Marriage consent in the Trajectories and Origins survey

Trajectories and Origins is a survey on population diversity in France conducted in 2008 on a sample of 22,000 persons aged 18-60 and living in metropolitan France [3]. It examines the living conditions and social trajectories of immigrants, sons and daughters of immigrants born in France and members of the mainstream population (neither immigrants, nor children of immigrants). It describes the circumstances in which respondents met their first spouse and formed their first union (cohabitation, civil, religious or customary marriage).

Two questions asked to both women and men explore the marriage decision. The first is:

Who initiated your marriage?, with five possible answers:

1/ Yourself

2/ Your spouse

3/ Both of you together

4/ Your parents or parents-in-law

5/ Another member of the family.

This question serves to determine the extent to which the respondent individually expressed a desire to marry.

When the respondent did not initiate the marriage (answer 2, 4 or 5), a second question is asked to determine the degree of consent:

Would you say that at that time:

1/ You really wanted to marry?

2/ You really wanted to marry, but you would have preferred to wait a bit longer

3/ You didn't want to marry and you were forced to do so through family pressure.

The spouse's degree of choice is identified by a question on how the couple first met: through the "family network" or a "family party"; in the place of work or education; through friends; in a public place or other context.

In 77% of non-consensual marriages and 69% of marriages without the woman's full consent, the bride met her husband via the family network, while for marriages contracted freely the proportion is just 16%. Last, for immigrants' daughters married against their will, the husband is an immigrant in 33% of cases, the son of an immigrant in 11% of cases, and a member of the mainstream population for the remainder (56%). Hence, only half at most of all non-consensual marriages can be arranged marriages designed to keep the bride within the community of origin, since the other half of these marriages are mixed. Non-consensual marriages with a member of the mainstream population correspond to situations where it is not the spouse that is imposed, but the marriage itself.

◆ Two-thirds of forced marriages end in divorce

Among the population of immigrant origin in France, the reasons why parents intervene in their daughter's choice of spouse has thus undergone radical change. While immigrant women are concerned by arranged marriages concluded prior to migration, half of all cases among immigrants' daughters born in France are the result of a premarital relationship or a pregnancy that is intolerable to the woman's parents. They see a wedding as a means to "regularize the situation", while the woman herself may prefer the options of cohabitation or abortion.

The situation described here is by no means inescapable, as shown by the fact that 65% of immigrant women and 68% of immigrants' daughters married against their will had already divorced by the time of the survey, offering clear proof of their desire for independence.

Clearly, there is a need to provide more information on contraception and abortion, and to ensure that all women have access to these means of controlling their fertility. Last, given the scale of violence reported among women below age 18, and the risks of their dropping out of the educational system, a specific information campaign for teachers and school personnel would be a useful means to develop awareness of these issues.

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ABSTRACT

The Trajectories and Origins survey gathered information on respondents' conditions of marriage, making it possible to identify cases of "non-consensual" marriage. These are unwanted marriages, initiated by the spouse or the family, but contracted in response to psychological, social or physical coercion. For 9% of immigrant women aged 51-60 in 2008, their first marriage was contracted against their will. The proportion is lower among younger immigrant women (2% in the 26-30 age group) and among the daughters of immigrants (1% of the 26-30 age group). Non-consensual marriage is most frequent among immigrant women from countries and regions where singlehood is frowned upon and premarital sexuality prohibited, such as Turkey, North Africa and Sahelian Africa.