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Collet, Beate; Santelli, Emmanuelle

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Forced Marriages: Between Social Construction and Experience of Family Enforcement

Beate Collet and Emmanuelle Santelli

The question of what are called ‘forced’ marriages has been highlighted in French politics and news media for several years now and has produced the ambiguities that often arise with issues involving immigrants and their descendants. Voluntary bodies¹ and the authorities² have acted to raise public awareness of the problem and find adequate ways to care for victims. However, the way in which public opinion has responded to the issue, declarations by certain political figures³ and legal measures under the government’s immigration policy, impact on representations of immigrants and their descendants. As a result, media coverage of ‘forced marriages’ tends to accentuate the differentiation between a civilized ‘us’ and an archaic ‘them’, so helping to maintain a monolithic vision of cultures.

The polemic over how many forced marriages there are illustrates the ambiguity. A figure of 70,000 forced marriages in France was circulated in the early 2000s. On analysis, this figure proved to be an estimate of the number of young women originating from certain countries and likely to be faced with a forced marriage. But in statements by politicians reported in the media, it had been transformed into actual cases of forced marriage per year (Dittgen 2005;

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- 1 Voluntary bodies involved include *Mouvement français du Planning familial* (French family planning movement); *Ni putes, ni soumises* (‘not tarts, not submissive’); *Femmes contre les Intégrismes* (women against integrism) in Lyon; *Femmes informations juridiques internationales Rhône-Alpes*, Lyon, which provides legal information for women; *ELELE – Migrations et cultures de Turquie*, Paris, which helps Turkish migrants integrate; *GAMS – Groupe femmes pour l’abolition des mutilations sexuelles* (women’s group for the abolition of genital mutilation) in Paris; *Voix de femmes*, (activist group in Cergy-Pontoise) and many others.
 - 2 Eg. Seine-Saint-Denis department *Conseil Général*, Paris municipality and the Ministry of Education.
 - 3 Philippe de Villiers, presidential candidate, in a television broadcast on TF1, 12 February 2007.

Gresh 2007; Hamel 2008). In 2003, GAMS⁴ used the same figure to appeal for better provision for victims coming to the association for help. The *Haut Conseil à l'Intégration* (consultative body on immigrant integration) cited it in its 2003 annual report⁵, so making it more official, more statistical and thus scientifically grounded, whereas its purpose was in fact essentially political (see Collet, Philippe and Santelli 2008 for a more detailed analysis of how the issue of forced marriage broke into the public arena). The question is: how can unacceptable practices causing physical or mental injury or breaching the principle of equality between men and women be denounced while avoiding any confusion between arranged marriage and forced marriage? Failure to avoid that confusion only helps to cast suspicion on minority groups simply because their cultural practices do not exactly match those promoted in Westernized cultures of the early twenty-first century.

It is important to know whether there is a resurgence of forced marriages in the context of immigration today, in France particularly but also more broadly in Europe. It does not seem possible to measure the scale of the phenomenon precisely. The mere fact of bringing the issue out of the private family sphere into the public arena through discussion within various sectors of society (albeit polemical) and awareness campaigns organized by non-profit bodies increases the number of reported cases. Until there is public denunciation of these marriages they cannot be counted. The forced marriage issue is an excellent sociological example of how a social reality comes into existence once it is socially, politically and publicly constructed. Without public denunciation and the introduction of social and legal assistance (Clark and Richards 2008)⁶, forced marriage would remain cloistered in the private sphere and those subjected to it would not know that they can find help to oppose it. Apart from making it possible to measure the phenomenon, denunciation of such practices enables young women to realize that this is violence and that it is possible to escape it. However, the way the issue is handled politically is not driven solely by a desire to protect women against violence. It can also involve political issues connected with controlling immigration and monitoring minorities regarded as politically sensitive, such as Muslim minorities (Wilson 2007)⁷.

4 GAMS, *Groupe femmes pour l'abolition des mutilations sexuelles* (women's group for the abolition of genital mutilation).

5 Haut Conseil à l'Intégration (2003): *Le contrat et l'intégration* Annual report. Paris: Rapport remis au premier ministre, accessible sur internet.

6 In recent years political debate on the issue has developed in a number of European countries, together with institutional measures to prevent or ban forced marriages.

7 Wilson shows how in the United Kingdom the fight against forced marriages, and particularly the drafting of the recent act of parliament, have pursued the goals of controlling immigration and countering Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

Forced marriage as a sociological construction

Uncertainty about the scale of the phenomenon and its polemical nature make it difficult to construct ‘forced marriage’ as a sociological object. A study of ‘non-consent’⁸ provided the opportunity to reflect on the social emergence of the ‘forced marriage’ phenomenon and on the sociological approaches that seek to understand it by analyzing gender relations and the multicultural realities of our society.

‘Forced marriages’ seem to lie at a junction between value systems: individualistic values based on love and free choice versus more holistic values that focus on marriage alliances as the basis of inheritance and symbolic transmission. Examined more closely, however, this comparison is not so simple. An apparently individual, free choice of spouse is also shaped by socially constructed, interiorized social mechanisms, while families arranging a marriage generally seek the consent of the future spouses. It should also be borne in mind that neither the so-called traditional or customary cultural practices nor the religious framework (Islam in this case) advocates the use of constraint or violence to establish a marriage. Nonetheless, the way things are presented suggests that ‘forced marriage’ emerges from the confrontation between value systems setting two generations in a family against each other. But this confrontation is not only intergenerational; it has become intercultural because the younger generation uses a different frame of reference to their parents’ with respect to marriage preferences and practices (Neyrand, Hammouche and Mekboul 2008).⁹

The testimony of young women confronted with forced marriage (whether in preparation or already accomplished) shows the undeniably violent and sometimes altogether sordid nature of the practice. A forced marriage involves relations of domination of men over women and elders over the young. Because whether the marriage is religious or civil, we speak of ‘forced marriage’ once it involves violence: one of the spouses has refused

8 The study’s title is *Entre consentement et imposition, les modes d’entrée dans la conjugalité à l’intersection du genre, de l’ethnicité et des rapports entre générations* (Between consent and enforcement: modes of entry to conjugal life at the junction between gender, ethnicity and relations between generations). It was conducted in 2006–2008 by a team of seven researchers from different institutions: Rim Ben Hassine (student), Beate Collet (sociologist, Paris-Sorbonne), Pascale Donati (senior researcher, Paris), Christelle Hamel (sociologist, INED), Claudine Philippe (sociologist, INSERM, IRIS), Saïda Ousmaal (teacher), Emmanuelle Santelli (sociologist, CNRS, MoDys Lyon). The research was based at INED and financed by INED, ISH Lyon and MSH Paris-Nord. It produced a feature in the journal *Migrations & Société*, coordinated by Emmanuelle Santelli and Beate Collet (2008).

9 This book, the first about forced marriages in France, focuses its analysis on intercultural confrontation. This is an essential dimension, but must be seen in the light of intergenerational and gender relations.

the marriage or at least has not given their free and enlightened agreement, or their consent is forced from them by psychological, moral or physical pressure. This social reality implies that forced marriage is part of a wider problem of family violence and even more broadly of gender relations.

Violence in the family is not exclusively a feature of foreign and/or immigrant families (i.e. from cultures different to that of the majority group) and patriarchal mindsets have by no means died out in France (Maruani 2005; Blöss 2001)¹⁰. The nationwide survey on violence against women in France (ENVEFF) shows this clearly (Jaspard et al. 2003): women of all social and cultural backgrounds suffer physical, psychological and sexual violence in some form or other. In the case of forced marriage, family violence arises in connection with marriage because in the country of origin it was traditionally the parents who controlled marriage alliances: maintaining this prerogative in the country of arrival is '*a way of asserting membership of the identity group*' (Neyrand, Hammouche and Mekboul 2008). So family tensions can be extreme if the parents are still operating in a register in which male pre-eminence and authoritarianism prevail in relations between parents and children, men and women (Kateb 2009), while the children have adopted the values current in French society. They can crystallize around marriage and lead to imposing a marriage partner by force. For the woman, to be married against her will is the expression of both intergenerational and sexist violence. The men also seem to be subjected to pressure, but on the whole have greater scope for breaking free of parental enforcement.

As well as the confrontation between value systems, there is also a confrontation between systems of sociological explanation. The debate is sometimes conducted as if recognition of minority cultural particularities were in total contradiction to the defence of women's rights. Researchers in the UK and North America, where these issues have been studied for many years, describe a tension between feminism and multiculturalism (Moller Okin 1998; Guenif-Souilamas and Mace 2004). How can the two approaches be combined? Is it possible to argue that minority populations' cultural practices must be respected while condemning violence against women and the excessively patriarchal ways of certain social milieus (of whatever cultural composition) in the name of gender equality and non-violent interpersonal relations? Anne Phillips thinks it is, provided we reject the stereotyping of other

10 Proof of this is the violence against women in the public and private domains (sexual harassment, insults, rape), but also discrimination in the labour market (the 'glass ceiling' and wage differentials) and politics (under-representation of women despite a deliberate policy of parity). See Maruani (2005) and Blöss (2001) to grasp the extent to which access to the higher echelons of power are still eminently problematic for women.

cultures and recognize that the cultural practices of any minority population will include variation and diversity (2007)¹¹.

For the ‘forced marriage’ phenomenon to exist socially, it is important that it be constructed in legal terms. Without international recognition of the principle of gender equality and the gradual elaboration of legal protection for women and children against violence¹², a social reality such as forced marriage would not be visible. National and international law recognize the principle of free consent to marriage as a fundamental principle, and any legal action to determine the forced nature of a marriage is based on the concept of consent between marriage partners. However, not all countries have written the principle of gender equality into their legislation to the same extent (Mekboul 2008). Sociologically speaking, there are still two major obstacles.

One is the divergence between international legal principles and the persistence of ancestral or customary traditions. Any social reality, anywhere in the world, is marked by such discrepancies. Simply, societies differ in the degree to which they have advanced towards recognizing such legal principles, though none has realized them fully. In France, the first thorough legal and anthropological study of ‘forced marriage’ was conducted by Edwige Rude-Antoine for the Council of Europe in 2005¹³.

The second obstacle concerns the question of consent. The notion of consent seems to be the key to identifying forced marriage in legal terms, but it is still sociologically problematic (for a more philosophical discussion, see Fraisse 2007). But male domination of women works in many subtle ways so it is not always easy to assess the violence involved in obtaining consent. Socialized from childhood to conform to the role and place of women in a patriarchal society, women confronted with a plan for an arranged marriage may succumb to the decision rather than consent¹⁴. They do not always have the necessary independence to refuse such plans, especially given their emotional tie with their parents (Deveaux 2006). This raises the question whether there can be consent in a relation of domination, or more broadly in an unequal relationship. As the meaning of consent cannot be clearly defined, a more sociological definition of ‘forced marriage’ is difficult to establish and

11 Anne Phillips argues for going beyond controversy-based interpretations with a more flexible view of culture as being always socially and sexually constructed.

12 Attested in the various supra-regional and national versions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the many International Charters and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights).

13 Edwige Rude-Antoine (2005) has been comparing anthropological and legal systems regarding immigration for many years; see also an earlier book published in 1997.

14 Following Nicole-Claude Mathieu’s much-quoted expression ‘*céder n’est pas consentir*’ (1991).

the role of sociology is to deconstruct this social reality and arrive at a better understanding of the phenomenon through a more nuanced view.

These analyses also raise the question of defining the concepts of 'domination' and 'violence'. There are three different conceptions of domination depending on the sociologists' theoretical position. For sociologists working from a feminist perspective, a woman's submission to or acceptance of even the institution of marriage as such reflects a relation of domination. Seen in this way, marriage is always imposed, regardless of social or cultural milieu, since a woman's condition very rarely allows her to freely consent to sexual intercourse. In a gender-based theoretical framework, in which equality is the central issue, forced marriage is an abuse of a dominant position in a patriarchal system whose legitimacy is today called into question. The culturalist analysis, on the other hand, seeks to understand forced marriage within a specific cultural system; free consent and equality, as values, reveal the forced nature of a marriage but in so doing reveal the imposition of Western values. It is not easy to find an analytical approach that will make the junction between all these preoccupations.

The concept of violence poses the same theoretical problems. Once a relationship of domination is recognized, violence is its corollary, though taking many different forms (real or symbolic, direct or indirect, physical or psychological). It is not easy to draw a line between a tolerable social constraint (integration into a social circle, wanting to please the parents etc.) and an intolerable one (psychological pressure or physical violence). For these reasons, in our study, the only possible empirical benchmark for identifying a marriage as forced was the discourse of the women concerned. They had to have signaled that they had suffered violence, either at the time of the marriage plan or after the wedding.

Studying non-consent

To address the issue of immigrants' descendants' conjugal and family decisions, we and our colleagues conducted a study entitled *Étude sur le non-consentement* (non-consent study), expressly addressing the dual problem of gender relations and the confrontation between value systems (Collet and Philippe 2008; Santelli and Collet 2003). It was a theoretical and empirical study which began by deconstructing the emergence of the 'forced marriage' issue in the public arena before exploring the experience of victims of forced marriages and the institutional provisions made for them. From the start the study took a dual approach, both political-institutional and based on bio-

graphical experience, with the idea that this complex phenomenon could be better grasped by alternating between these two spheres. Interviews were conducted with associations, social workers, organizations and institutions responsible for finding solutions for women confronted with the problem, whether concerned specifically with violence against the women or with women's situations more generally. Carried out in Montpellier and the Paris and Lyon areas, the interviews provided the opportunity to ascertain available facilities, partnerships and changing methods of intervention. They laid the basis for analyzing the emergence of the recognition of the phenomenon while highlighting the difficulties and limitations of such methods of social intervention.

Twenty interviews were held with women confronted with the reality of an imposed or forced marriage, to gain some understanding of the process of enforcement within the family and the courses of action open to the women to deal with the situation. They were interviewed in women's shelters, the encounters being mediated by voluntary bodies or through personal contacts of members of the team¹⁵. The women made up a very varied population but could not be called a representative sample. Most of them were immigrants, others were young women born of immigrant parents and either born or brought up in France. Some had been exposed to the threat of a forced marriage; others had been unable to avoid it or had only denounced it some years later. Our specific mode of access to the population concerned reflects the construction of the research object. All the interviewees said they had been compelled to marry or had openly refused to obey parental orders. It was not possible to reach women living in a forced marriage, unable to express their refusal or disagreement, and who live among us without us knowing the reality of their private lives.

The analysis set out below focuses on the experiences of victims of forced marriage from an event history standpoint. How is the process of enforcing a marriage within a family to be reconstructed from these women's accounts? Forced marriage is a multifaceted phenomenon, given the different forms of violence and domination and the difficulty of defining consent between spouses. By looking more specifically at these young women's experiences we can gain a better idea of the phenomenon and its variety.

15 We would like to thank these young women for having trusted us as they did. Thanks also to Rim Ben Hassine, Pascale Donati and Saïda Ousmaal for conducting the interviews and to the various associations who enabled us to meet the women.

Women's attitudes to marriages imposed on them by their parents

Including women who had been married by force and also those who were under threat of it made it possible to describe how the process of imposing a marriage unfolds in a family and the means available to these women to oppose it. Four different attitudes for dealing with parental pressure stood out. Each reveals relations between generations, the spiral of violence and the roles of the various protagonists (mother, father, broader kin group, brothers and sisters, friends, neighbours, social services) and sheds light on the social roots of the enforcement process. The possibility of resisting this violence varies according to a woman's personal characteristics and background (nationality, the country she grew up in, how long she has been in France, her level of education, social network etc.). There are various family configurations, but all fall within a patriarchal pattern of family relations which seems to be amplified in a situation of residential segregation and closing of borders.

Refusal on principle

Some women reject their parents' plans to marry them *on principle* and from the outset, regardless of what the potential spouse is like or the motives put forward. They assert their wish to choose the man they will live with because they have developed a conception of the couple in which the partners' feelings for each other and their shared plans for their life together are essential factors. These young women have internalized the values of romantic love that predominate in Western society. These are women born in France and socialized to the values of French society. They are better educated than the rest (baccalauréat or higher). They have a diverse network of friendships (friends from different cultural backgrounds and social milieus) and have formed their reference universe through this process of socialization. This has distanced them from the values and social practices of their family and community of origin.

When they become aware of their parents' plans for a forced marriage (having already rejected all their parents' proposals) they usually flee from home, helped by friends and intermediaries such as teachers, social workers or voluntary bodies they have turned to. These are the women best able to cut family ties because they are fully aware of the incomprehension between their world of values and their parents'. By leaving home when forced marriage threatens they are often also escaping violence both in the family (illegal confinement, beatings) and in the marriage (beatings, rape). But some

had been deliberately deceived by their parents (father and/or mother): on a trip to the country of origin they were deprived of their identity papers. Without access to their mutual help network they could hardly escape the marriage and its consummation (which can only be described as rape). Those that manage to escape the situation and the family circle are then able to express their aspirations and how they mean to live their lives. Very often, they make a radical break with the world in which they grew up. Their parents' marriage plan has revealed a deeper level of incomprehension than was evident before.

Circumstantial refusal

Circumstantial refusal is when women accept the principle of marrying according to their parents' proposals but reject the marriage actually proposed for circumstantial reasons. These women have internalized endogamy as a norm more than those who object on principle. They validate their parents' values, including the idea that it is legitimate for parents to organize matrimonial alliances. But they reject the particular suitor proposed because they think the time is not right (they have not completed their studies or think they are too young) or the suitor does not match their criteria (e.g. too old, not to their taste in looks). In this respect, they share with the first group the aspiration to individual choice and the project of living according to the ideal of romantic love.

While these women, like the first group, are from immigrant backgrounds, they are generally less well educated. Above all, they are less able to imagine a life without the support and comfort of their family of origin. Their family socialization has been clearly gender-specific: girls' activities outside the home were controlled, they had to do all the housework, were at the service of the men of the household and emphasis was on the prime importance of family roles for girls. More generally, they have not questioned the legitimacy of arranged marriage; it was only the circumstances they did not agree with. They might accept one arranged marriage to avoid another. When women of this group refuse, they do not imagine what the reaction will be. Their attitude crystallizes their parents' anger and disapproval. They now discover that their parents are prepared to go further and intend to maintain their authority uncontested. The arranged marriage proves to be non-negotiable. Often these women find themselves drawn into an increasingly violent spiral: insults, threats, blows, confinement, confiscation of mobile phones and ID papers. Often there had already been violence in these families; patriarchal order reigned, with the mother subjected to male authority as

much as the girls. But the marriage refusal issue amplifies this violence and other family members may join in, particularly the mother, but also brothers and sisters.

These women do not have the same kind of mutual support network as the first group. They think they will be able to come to an arrangement with their parents. Their social network does not give them the same access to a world of different norms with which to contest their parents' decision. Nor does it provide the means to escape before the marriage takes place. Some may manage, usually with the help of a relative (an aunt or an elder sister), social services or the non-profit sector, but there is a marked reticence to criticize their parents and to denounce them. Despite their refusal to give in, they are not questioning the legitimacy of their parents' actions. They remain ambivalent and do not always opt for the solutions the welfare associations propose. Because of the difficulty of breaking their ties with their families, several of them had in the end been forced to marry under pressure of violence. Often it was only later, this time in the face of conjugal violence, that they decided to leave and took steps to divorce or have the marriage annulled.

Refusal after the event

A third group of women did not refuse to marry but expressed their rejection *after the event*. They had accepted the principle that it was their parents' role to choose their husband. Only afterwards, immersed in a particularly violent situation (ill-treated by the family-in-law, beaten by the husband) did they decide to flee and declare the marriage a forced one. Enduring a situation unacceptable to them, they retrospectively define their marriage as forced. We can imagine that if their marital life had been a smooth one they would never have wished to break it off. Many are so vulnerable and isolated in their family situation that they long delay before making a denunciation.

Thus, these women ultimately denounce their marriage as forced when they face marital violence, extreme subordination or humiliation: a violent husband, unjust in-laws or ill-treatment at their hands, problems such as illness, handicap or a drug problem that were not revealed before the marriage. Calling it a forced marriage is a way of de-legitimizing it and highlighting the violence used against them. Most women in this group are immigrants who came to France after their marriage and have no support network of family or friends. Some had accepted the marriage without conviction, as a means to emigrate and escape their own family. This is different from cases where family strategy on both sides is aimed at allowing a man residency in

France by right of marriage with a French citizen. Rather, it is a more common situation that these women face: a marriage alliance that serves to maintain family and community relations. In this exchange logic, and in the face of an increasingly restrictive immigration policy, women are still the prime victims in a milieu that maintains the tradition of using women as bargaining chips. The survey found many such examples: a man who offers his daughter to his friend or an orphaned woman married off so that the husband's family will take charge of her.

Some of the situations encountered were particularly sordid and can rightly be called modern slavery¹⁶. Deprived of their freedom, some women were forced to do all the domestic work for the husband's family. Such illegal confinement is accompanied by various kinds of ill-treatment ranging from insults to confiscation of belongings, sexual harassment or even rape by male family members (total subjection and confinement of the woman)¹⁷. They are so severely damaged psychologically they have difficulty taking the smallest initiative. They are not culturally prepared to rebel, just as they were not able to refuse the marriage. They have very low self-esteem, badly undermined by the violence they have suffered. Once out of their 'prison', they need help from several institutional structures to be able to cope. Most, having no qualifications or working experience, have difficulty achieving financial independence – and if their children are still with the family-in-law, their prospects are grim.

Accepted forced marriages

A fourth type of attitude is that of women who recognize the forced nature of their marriage but do not denounce it at the time and have in some way *adapted to it*. Like the women of the second and third types, these women are convinced of the legitimacy of parental authority in matrimonial matters and have not dared to oppose the project. They accept the marriage as their fate, having internalized the fact that they have no individual freedom in this sphere. The marriage can, therefore, be imposed on them without too much violence. Some of these women are immigrants, others of immigrant parent-

16 The *Comité contre l'esclavage moderne* (Committee against modern slavery, CCEM) denounces all forms of modern slavery: forced labour, debt servitude, forced marriage, illegal workshops and sexual exploitation of women and children. See 2006 CCEM annual report at http://www.esclavagemoderne.org/img_doc/2006_bilan_site.pdf.

17 As with other types of modern slavery, there may be many women are living in these conditions without the neighbours realising or raising the alarm. A survey of this kind cannot cover these situations.

age. Their family socialization has been strongly gender-specific, based on the individual's absolute dependence on the family group. They could not envisage a personal choice, let alone a refusal. In their view, their parents are in a position to suggest the matrimonial alliance that is in their best interests, so they give way. They are ready to give up a love relationship to marry the man their parents have chosen according to their lineage tradition. Although most of these women have little education, some have had secondary education or more. Once they reach the age of 25, they are afraid of not finding a husband and, above all, of not having children, so they allow the choice of a husband to be imposed on them.

This situation is much like that of immigrants' daughters in the 1960s and 1970s whose parents imposed a husband on them. Women of this type have one thing in common: having absorbed a traditional conception of gender relations, they are aware that marriage is not a free choice but have accepted theirs and seem to accept their fate. They also clearly say that though they do not love their husband, they have learnt to tolerate him because he offers them a decent relationship. They also maintain the relationship out of respect for their families and/or their children. Despite all the drawbacks of the relationship, they accept what with hindsight they can see as a violence done to them, in the name of a certain family order that must be respected. This behaviour pattern demonstrates the difficulty of drawing a line between consent and refusal. It seems a very thin line because even if these women expressed their reticence, they did not persistently refuse and at some point they said 'yes'.

These four different ways of refusing or denouncing a forced marriage reveal the two concomitant factors that define a marriage as forced: a refusal expressed more or less assertively at some point and the parents' persistence in wishing to enforce the marriage at all costs. The question of consent is necessary but not sufficient for comprehending the process of forced marriage. Consideration must also be given to the different forms of violence used to force a woman to comply with a matrimonial system that defines a system of social relations. Our typology has also shown that some women (the second and third types above) are more exposed to violence in the family when they express ambivalence towards their parents' value system. This violence may be physical or psychological, but in all cases it exposes individuals to a patriarchal domination light years away from the values of equality and freedom. Women may find it more or less easy to escape from this depending on how far they adhere to their parents' value system.

Tighter adherence to patriarchal conceptions in the context of immigration

To conclude, it is important to highlight the particularity of some family situations. There is not the space here to discuss the social causes in terms of immigrants' situation on arrival (with conditions for legal immigration becoming increasingly restrictive) and after (with increasing segregation in the suburban housing estates). However, it seems that certain family circumstances are more likely to produce a forced marriage. These are families where the parents' attitudes have not changed; on the contrary, in the new country, they seem to have hardened, perhaps into an even more rigid conception of patriarchal control than in the home country.

A feature of all the situations encountered is that social and interpersonal relations within the family are ruled by a patriarchal logic. Young women are faced with *a traditional conception of matrimonial alliances* in which a marriage strengthens family and clan ties, helps to amass assets or supply a 'service', with women as bargaining chips. From this perspective, the women even more than the men in the family are subjected to the infallible logic of the group which, in turn, provides protection, assistance and resources for each member. Family ties are ties of dependence, not freely chosen, and are based on a strict organization in which men dominate women and elders dominate the young.

Anne-Catherine Wagner (2008) has shown that among the French aristocracy and high bourgeoisie, both men and women are subject to family imperatives based on the same idea of marriage with 'one of our own sort'. The difference lies in the way the family's matrimonial choice is imposed on the young: one punishes misalliance by disowning or banishing the couple or denying them privileges, the other has a conception of mandatory family ties and will impose family marriage alliances by violence if need be. While it is important to bear in mind that forced marriage seems to concern a very small minority, it is clearly part of a system of violent relations towards women. It is a type of restrictive and violent behaviour in the family arena which deserves censure, but it is not to be confused with customary practices in other cultural contexts. This violence against women becomes a system in itself, over and above the reference culture. While there may be conjugal violence in Western societies, here it takes on a particular resonance at the inter-generational level. What is at stake is the possibility for women to freely choose the man they will marry, but in both cases, the women remain objects of male domination.

However, it is because identities become racialized that the stigmatization is liable to be extended to the entire Muslim immigrant population, for

whom, overall, practices are further removed than most from the new Western sexual order. It is by making clear that these practices are a minority phenomenon, by denouncing the social conditions that produce them and by providing suitable assistance for women seeking a way out that family values, here and elsewhere, can be transformed.

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