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## Manual issued to stop forced marriages

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By Estelle Shirbon

PARIS (Reuters) - The Paris City Hall launched a manual on forced marriages on Wednesday to help officials spot and prevent cases of young women being coerced into matrimony.

An estimated 70,000 teenage girls living in France are victims or potential victims of forced marriages, many of them from immigrant families, according to a government study.

Municipal officials in charge of conducting weddings are often at a loss about what to do when faced with a suspicious situation, hence the new guidelines.

"A wedding is normally a moment of happiness when officials participate in the joy of families, but it can turn into a nightmare," said Jacques Bravo, mayor of the 9th district of the city, at an event to launch the manual.

"There are situations when you arrive in the weddings hall only to find a young woman alone on one side of the room and 60 or 80 men on the other side. As a young official it can be hard to know what to do," he said.

Bravo said that in his district, one of 20 in Paris that have a city hall where weddings take place, there were usually three or four cases of suspected forced marriages a year out of approximately 350 weddings.

Causes can vary widely, from cultural and religious factors to the will by immigrant parents to "protect" their daughters from feared relationships with men from other communities.

The new manual, a 32-page booklet that will be distributed to officials in the 20 districts, lists clues that can arouse suspicions and explains what the law allows officials to do.

Danger signals include cases when middlemen fill in the required documents ahead of the wedding, when the woman does not appear at the city hall at any point before the wedding day, or when there is a big age difference between the man and the woman.

"There have to be several clues to arouse suspicions ... None of these clues, taken separately, is enough to prove a forced marriage," the manual says.

The law allows suspicious officials to organize pre-wedding interviews with the couple, either together or separately, to try and determine if they both consent to be married.

The manual lists signs that can alert officials to intimidation of the future wife. These include a state of distress or apparent submission to relatives, an inability to answer questions clearly, a lack of knowledge of the proposed husband's personal history and a lack of plans for the future.

"You must be attentive and vigilant because fear can neutralize the resistance

of a victim of forced marriage ... A young woman can say 'yes' when she means 'no'," the manual says.

It also gives guidelines on circumstances when officials can stop the actual wedding ceremony, and how to seek an annulment after the event when evidence emerges of a forced marriage.

(Editing by Richard Balmforth)

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