

English summary  
of Fafo-rapport 2021:32

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**Someone to belong to**  
Mentoring schemes for  
young people who have  
broken ties with their  
families

# Someone to belong to

## Mentoring schemes for young people who have broken ties with their families

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In 2017, the Solberg government charged the Directorate of Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) with the development of a mentoring scheme for young people who were exposed to negative social control, honour-based violence and forced marriage. The mentoring scheme was to be developed in collaboration with NGOs that are active in this area and provide help and support to those affected to permit them to live independently. In this study we have explored the development process for the mentoring scheme and how it functions in the encounter with its target group.

We have chosen to see this from the point of view of young adults who are linked to, have been linked to or want to participate in a mentoring scheme, as well as those who have served as mentors. Moreover, we have investigated the ways in which the NGOs that are responsible for mentoring programmes work with these issues. We have also examined the collaboration between the responsible authorities and the NGOs in developing the mentoring scheme. We have collected a data material consisting of interviews with participants, volunteers, organisation leaders, public administration employees and other actors that have been involved in the scheme. In addition to these qualitative interviews, we have also examined documents associated with the mentoring scheme in public authorities and the organisations. On this basis we have drawn up a picture of needs, experiences and challenges associated with the programmes and discuss a future direction for these services.

### **A target group struggling with being lonely**

The target group for the mentoring scheme includes young adults over 18 years of age who have broken ties with their families for reasons related to negative social control, forced marriage and honour-based violence. By breaking ties with their families, they have obtained a life of 'negative freedom', meaning freedom from negative social control, forced marriage and honour-based violence. However, much remains before these young people can achieve 'positive freedom', meaning freedom to live the life they want for themselves. For many of those whom we interviewed and who had broken all ties to their families, this break implied taking a step into a social void. 'I needed many people around me, but I was totally alone,' one of them says. For some, this isolated existence has also

persisted after the acute stage. Loneliness features strongly in the narratives that this group provides about their daily lives.

The target group for the mentoring scheme has lost the companionship of their families, and they bring with them painful experiences that will accompany them throughout their lives. In addition, they have little practice in being alone, and often a very limited network outside the family circle. Isolation features prominently during the phase when the young people seek to establish an independent life. This isolation is exacerbated by two components: an emotional component and a security component. The emotional aspects derive from the fact that these individuals have very negative experiences associated with intimate relationships and trust in others. The security aspect is related to the need not to divulge too much information about themselves for reasons of their own security. These two components hinder the young people in the target group from trusting others, speaking openly and entering into new relationships.

There are, however, major variations in the life stories and life situations of this target group. In the report we show the particular challenges involved in being in the process of reestablishment while also being a recent immigrant, with the problems this implies in terms of understanding the language, dealing with public administration and finding Norwegian friends. This entails an extra need for help, support and inclusion, which are required to develop a sense of belonging and freedom to live the life that is desired. We also see that men in the target group may be met with less understanding because of social expectations for how men are supposed to behave, and there are also fewer programmes that are open to men.

### **An initiative from above**

A mentoring scheme for young people who are exposed to negative social control, honour-based violence and forced marriage was Measure no. 9 in the *The right to decide about one's own life. An action plan to combat negative social control, forced marriage and female genital mutilation (2017–2020)*. The mentoring scheme was initiated by the Norwegian government, i.e. from above, but on request from campaigners and activists, and with the clear ambition that this initiative should be developed in collaboration with civil society actors.

The assignment was given to Bufdir, which ensured that the mentoring scheme was developed with the assistance of a service design agency and coordinated the development of the content of the scheme in co-creation with various organisations in this field. The service designers identified numerous and comprehensive needs for support in the target group and therefore proposed not a single mentoring programme, but a small catalogue of various efforts: networks, counselling by public agencies, activity friends, mentor families and a reinforcement of the residential and support measures for young people over the age of 18.

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From these proposals, Bufdir recommended to earmark funds for two specific programmes: the *Sammen (Together)* network, which had already been operated by the Oslo Women's Shelter for many years, and *Mentorfamilie (Mentor Family)*, which had to be developed. Bufdir asked the Oslo Red Cross to develop and operate the mentor family programme based on their experience with similar activities, and because the organisation is represented nationwide. The Red Cross accepted the request. In addition, Bufdir recommended to establish a grant that would accept applications for support to mentoring activities under the auspices of other organisations. The Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) was charged with the administration of a national grant scheme for integration efforts undertaken by NGOs. Finally, Bufdir also established *Mentorhub*, a venue for NGOs engaging in mentoring activities for young people who are exposed to negative social control, honour-based violence and forced marriage.

These measures in combination came to constitute the mentoring scheme. In our study, we have investigated three measures in particular: The Red Cross Mentor Family, the *Ressursvenn (Resource Friend)* scheme of the Norwegian Women's Public Health Association (NKS) and the *Together* network under the auspices of Oslo Women's Shelter. In addition, we have attended meetings of the *Mentorhub* as observers.

## **Experiences from one-to-one mentoring activities**

The Red Cross Mentor Family programme receives earmarked funding and is a new initiative that was co-created by the authorities and the voluntary sector. In this programme, young people who have broken ties with their families are linked to a voluntary mentor family. The Norwegian Women's Public Health Association's *Resource Friend* programme has for many years received funding from IMDi and other public and private agencies, based on applications. Here, women who have been exposed to violence in intimate relations and have sought help from a shelter or a residential and support scheme are matched with a voluntary resource person. This scheme has a target group that overlaps with, but is not identical to, that of the Red Cross mentor families. The two measures are both targeting young people who have broken ties with their families.

While the *Mentor Family* is a new initiative launched by the authorities, *Resource Friend* was developed internally in the NKS organisation. Both programmes rely on a large amount of voluntary work, and the organisations make a considerable effort to recruit the best suited volunteers and match them with the most appropriate young participants. This appears to be most challenging in the Mentor Family programme, where it is complicated both to recruit volunteers and establish connections that meet the young person's expectations and needs.

The term 'family' means that the participants have different expectations for the *Mentor Family* programme than for the *Resource Friend*. Some young people

have an intense desire for a family and may enter the programme with great expectations. These expectations can be difficult to meet given the temporary nature of the scheme, which is based on a contract between the participant and the volunteer. Our interviews also show that the volunteers have varying intentions and ambitions, and different amounts of time and commitment available to bring to this relationship. This is therefore a challenging programme to operate successfully. On the other hand, this programme may also have the greatest potential to bring about real change for the participants, and to meet their needs. This is clearly demonstrated by the cases in which the connections have been especially successful. *Resource Friend* also depends on successful one-to-one connections, but as noted by the organisations, participants and volunteers, it is easier to arrange friendships than to construct a family.

Some of the participants who have had a mentor family, or a resource friend, have succeeded in obtaining a new family to belong to or a new friend to rely on for support in life. This is to some extent because the volunteers in question have chosen to enter into a close personal relationship, invite the participant into their family and involve him or her in their life. Some volunteers enlist with intentions of initiating some form of friendship, while others envisage more family-like constellations. Many describe the dynamics that have occurred in these encounters as reinforcing the personal ties that they have chosen to open up for. The person for whom they have acted as mentor family or resource friend has reciprocated and shown them trust, expressed their enjoyment of the personal contact and shown them affection. The volunteers, on their part, have listened, helped, aided, been available and shown concern and affection in return. Some of the relationships that have been established were described in terms of friendship, others as close family ties.

Many of those involved wish to continue to meet after the expiry of the stipulated period of time. Some participants state that they have found a friend or a family for life. Other connections have not established a permanent relationship or an enduring relationship of the kind that the young participant wanted. Sometimes, the personal chemistry is simply not right, or the expectations are too dissimilar and a basis for a personal relationship fails to materialise. These experiences can occasionally be emotionally burdensome.

## **Experiences with the *Together* network**

The *Together* network under the auspices of Oslo Women's Shelter has been granted funds through the mentoring scheme, and its target group overlaps with that of the Red Cross mentor families, i.e. young people who have broken with their families. The network is not open to men, however. It is a group-based network and activity programme for previous residents in the shelter's residential

and support scheme and is operated by the shelter's staff, with no engagement of volunteers.

*Together* appears to offer something else to young people who have broken all ties to their families than what the mentor family and resource friend programmes do: a community of people who are in the same situation, meaning that the participants are met with understanding and respect without having to explain and reveal their personal experiences. Their mutual understanding arises from the commonality of the participants' backgrounds. Moreover, this can give some hope to those who need to see that others have lived through and are able to cope with the same experiences as their own, showing that life can actually get better. These are valuable experiences that are difficult to provide as an externally recruited volunteer or as a professional, but the young adults in the target group for the mentoring scheme can provide this for each other in this arena, within the framework provided by the staff of the residential collective.

The fact that the basis for understanding and trust here stems from shared experiences and that the participants can inspire each other when they meet at different stages of recognisable processes means that the participants in the *Together* programme fulfil the role as mentors for each other in a way that comes naturally.

The participants engage in activities that are organised by the staff of the residential collective and serve as an important arena for this community of peers, and they also provide some relief from the emotional burden that many participants carry with them. The professionals play a key role in the organisation of the *Together* programme as well as for the participants' motivation to attend the programme, since the professionals have a long-standing relationship with them and know them well.

### **The mentoring scheme as help and support for an independent life**

In what way, if at all, are the programmes in the mentoring scheme able to compensate for the loss of family and network, and provide help and support to establish an independent life? The voluntary effort that is mobilised in the mentor family and resource friend programmes help provide young people who have broken the ties with their families with something that the professional helpers cannot: someone with whom to spend both weekdays and holidays, someone they trust and know well, someone who is fond of them and for whom they can be a significant individual. However, providing all this requires a professional organisational structure that underpins this voluntary work to ensure professionalism, follow-up, quality, safety and continuity in the programmes. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that there is no set recipe for making the appropriate connections and for being a volunteer in this specific area. Instead, these aspects

need to be continuously discussed, reviewed and developed on the basis of systematisation of the experience gained.

To a greater extent than the voluntary programmes, the *Together* network can offer the experience of being understood without having to explain. Participants in the *Together* network share common experiences and hopes for a better life. Watching how others cope after having gone through the same experience as oneself is a source of both learning and hope. Here too, the professionals play a key role in providing a framework for the sessions. Today, the opportunities to form such networks are geographically unevenly distributed, because *Together* is primarily available to people resident in and around Oslo. Young adults whom we interviewed in other regions called for opportunities to join such networks. Moreover, the network *Together* is open only to women. However, other types of networks can be supported from the funds administered by IMDi and operated by organisations. There are however some distinguishing marks attached to the *Together* network, that are not easy to obtain in a civil society network.

Not all of our young interviewees felt that the one-to-one programmes, such as *Mentor Family* and *Resource Friend*, produced the desired outcomes. The programmes do not always succeed in finding the *right* volunteer for the *right* participant. In such cases, the organisations have made provisions for a kind of emergency brake that the participants can pull, providing an opportunity to annul the connection without a direct confrontation with the volunteer. Beyond this, the participants in *Mentor Family* and *Resource Friend* have little influence over the way in which the voluntary effort is applied. The outcomes of this voluntary effort are therefore crucially dependent on facilitation by authorities and organisations and the way in which the volunteers approach their role.

These should be topics for further discussion and development of the mentoring scheme. The active role taken by Bufdir in the development of the scheme so far has meant that the programme is characterised by the authorities' goals, the premises of the voluntary sector and the wishes and desires of the target group, as these were expressed at the development stage. The establishment of *Mentorhub* has also helped provide the organisations with better insight into the efforts undertaken elsewhere, and this may have benefited the target group. This co-creation and the *Mentorhub* venue can provide a basis for further development of the mentoring scheme in a collaboration between the authorities and civil society organisations.

## Recommendations

- Ensure long-term funding for mentoring programmes that link participants and volunteers
- Distinguish between one-to-one and family-to-one linkages
- Provide support to various types of networks and peer-based programmes outside Oslo
- Thematised, discuss and develop the role of the volunteer in the mentoring programmes
- Evaluate the current residential and support programmes, especially with regard to time of residence and follow-up after relocation
- Further develop *Mentorhub* as a professional network and arena for discussion and exchange