

European Journal of Social Work

ISSN: 1369-1457 (Print) 1468-2664 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cesw20

Transnational barriers to national support – how power dynamics distance abused ethnic minority women from access to formal help

Anika Liversage

To cite this article: Anika Liversage (2025) Transnational barriers to national support – how power dynamics distance abused ethnic minority women from access to formal help, European Journal of Social Work, 28:5, 1027-1038, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2025.2504688

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2025.2504688

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 19 May 2025.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 578

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cesw20

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK
2025, VOL. 28, NO. 5, 1027–1038
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2025.2504688

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Transnational barriers to national support – how power dynamics distance abused ethnic minority women from access to formal help

Transnationale barrierer for national støtte – hvordan magtdynamikker begrænser voldsramte etniske minoritetskvinders adgang til hjælp

Anika Liversage

VIVE – the Danish center for social science research, Copenhagen K, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This article explores the pressing issue of how to provide abused ethnic minority women with suitable support. Set in Denmark, the study combines interviews with 18 women who have experienced interpersonal violence and 32 frontline workers who provide such women with support. Utilising Mahler and Pessar's model of gendered geographies of power, the article conceptualises barriers to support as stemming from the discrepant embedding of women and frontline workers: While frontline workers operate in the public space of the nation state, ethnic minority women are commonly embedded in transnational social fields with ties to their countries of origin. Consequently, at the intimate scale of private space, gendered expectations and family power dynamics anchored in the Global South may restrain women from accessing support. Furthermore, both vulnerability in the women's relationship with the nation state and embodied cross-border mobility in contexts of family discord can decrease women's possibilities for benefitting from nation-state support provisions that are in fact available. Similarly, individualised welfare state support measures may not be well-suited for meeting women's needs. An awareness of these complications and power dynamics, operating at different intertwined scales, could potentially improve the quality of social work for a particularly vulnerable group.

ABSTRAKT

Artiklen belyser udfordringerne ved at yde adækvat socialfaglig støtte til voldsramte kvinder med etnisk minoritetsbaggrund. Studiet bygger på interviews med 18 kvinder, der har oplevet vold i nære relationer, samt 32 frontmedarbejdere, der yder støtte til denne gruppe. Med afsæt i Mahler og Pessars model om kønnede magtgeografier undersøger artiklen, hvordan modsætninger mellem kvinderne og de frontmedarbejdere, som burde støtte dem, i praksis kan afskære kvinderne fra hjælp: Mens frontmedarbejdere er forankret i nationalstatens offentlige rum, er etniske minoritetskvinder ofte indlejret i private rum, der indgår i transnationale

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 January 2025
Accepted 5 May 2025

KEYWORDS
Intimate partner violence; social work; immigrant family conflict; transnational social fields

NØGLEORD
vold i nære relationer; socialt arbejde; konflikter i etniske minoritetsfamilier; transnationale forhold

CONTACT Anika Liversage ani@vive.dk VIVE – the Danish center for social science research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11, Copenhagen K, 1052- Denmark

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

sociale felter med stærke bånd til oprindelseslande. Familiemagtdynamikker og kønsspecifikke forventninger forankret i det globale Syd kan dermed begrænse kvindernes adgang til støtte. Dertil kommer, at både sårbarhed i kvindernes relation til nationalstaten (f.eks. i forhold til opholdstilladelse) og grænseoverskridende mobilitet der indgår i familiekonflikter kan undergrave kvindernes muligheder for at modtage den støtte, som reelt burde være tilgængelig. Endvidere er velfærdsstatens ofte stærkt individualiserede støttetiltag ikke altid tilstrækkelige til at imødekomme kvindernes behov. En øget bevidsthed om disse kompleksiteter og magtdynamikker, der opererer på forskellige, sammenvævede skalaer, kan potentielt styrke det sociale arbejde målrettet denne særligt sårbare gruppe.

Introduction

Scandinavian countries, including Denmark, show pride in being 'woman-friendly' welfare states (EIGE, 2023; Hernes, 1987). As migration has made Scandinavian societies increasingly multicultural, the life situation of ethnic minority women has gained growing importance, including how to provide support when such women experience interpersonal violence (IPV). Supporting this group can be difficult, with complications arising for a number of reasons, including issues of culture and language (Alaggia et al., 2017; Bø, 2015), a lack of trust in service providers (Johansen, 2022; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2022), and norms against seeking outside support for family troubles (Dutt, 2018).

In addition, as Baianstovu and Strid (2024) point out, further complications can arise due to the occurrence of the type of IPV commonly labelled as 'honor-based violence', as such violence simultaneously constitutes a stereotype and a reality. As a stereotype, a focus on 'honor' can contribute to an undue culturalization of women's abuse experiences, and both reinforce exclusionary boundary regimes and stigmatise entire minority populations (Farris, 2017; Keskinen, 2009; Razack, 2021). As a reality, some ethnic minority women suffer distinctive, more collective forms of violence that require specialised forms of support (Green et al., 2024; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2022; Olsson & Bergman, 2022).

In this article, I propose a perspective to better understand the complicated and intersecting barriers that can prevent abused ethnic minority women from seeking relevant social work support. I build on the foundational differences between the *national* embedding of social workers (Olivier-Mensah et al., 2017) and the *transnational* embedding of ethnic minority women. Transnational social fields can be defined as '*multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed*' (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1009). In such fields, actors are connected '*through direct and indirect relations across borders*' (Levitt & Schiller, 2004), and country-of-origin norms and practices often retain considerable importance. Cross-border relations also form conduits for mobility, which can complicate access to nation-state provisions of support.

In a globalised world, where urban areas, in particular, have become superdiverse, it is paramount to improve service provisions for increasingly diverse user groups (Julkunen et al., 2023). While a transition to more complex transnational approaches can now be observed in some parts of Europe (Schrooten, 2024), studies call for both a better understanding of transnational families from a social work perspective (Tan & Choo, 2023, p. 1485) and for increased '*empiric research on border-crossing phenomena and processes and their impact on social work*' (Schrooten, 2021, p. 1173).

In response to these calls, I combine interviews from both sides of the interface between nation-state social workers and ethnic minority survivors of IPV. I draw on the model of gendered geographies of power (Mahler & Pessar, 2001) to explore power dynamics operating at different, intertwined scales. This approach endeavours to provide a basis for engaging better with the pressing issue of providing suitable support to a vulnerable group.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I discuss research on ethnic minority women and abuse and outline my analytical framework. Second, I present my data and method. Third, I explore barriers to

support at levels both below and above the nation-state level of social work provisions, and the concrete ways in which cross-border mobility can impede access to support. I conclude with a discussion of the implications.

Violence against women in a context of migration

Violence against women is a universal challenge across all societies (Stöckl & Sorenson, 2024), though its prevalence varies across regions due to different gender regimes and levels of economic development (Bose, 2015; Walby, 2020). In countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq – all major origin-countries of immigration to Denmark (Statistics Denmark, 2023) – levels of violence against women are higher than in Scandinavia (WHO, 2021). In these origin countries, collectivistic family dynamics are common, and gendered notions of 'honor' and 'shame' heavily influence social behaviour (Khan, 2018; Rajkumar, 2023). Divorce can carry considerable stigma, leading many women to remain in abusive marriages rather than leave their husbands (Nasser-Eddin & Mhaissen, 2020; Zakar et al., 2012). In a post-migration context such family dynamics can expose some ethnic minority women to more collective forms of violence, perpetrated not only by partners but also by parents and parents-in-law (Bates, 2021; Bredal et al., 2020). These types of gendered and generational dynamics can both limit abused ethnic minority women's access to informal support and make them remain for longer in dysfunctional marriages, highlighting the importance of such women's access to adequate formal support provisions.

Besides norms and practices from the country of origin, migration itself can also increase women's vulnerability to IPV. Migration can, for example, sever supportive personal relationships and create communication barriers due to language differences (Ghafournia & Easteal, 2018; Kiamanesh & Hauge, 2019). Migration can also elevate levels of family abuse due to both economic disadvantage (Fernbrant et al., 2011) and the prevalence of trauma in many refugee communities (Kiram & Stronks, 2016; Timshel et al., 2017). A further factor is a precarious visa status. Female marriage migrants are particularly vulnerable to partner abuse when their residency status depends on their marital status (Anitha et al., 2018; Innes et al., 2024; Maher & Segrave, 2018). This vulnerability has been exacerbated by Europe's increasingly restrictive immigration legislation, reflecting a broader 'deportation turn' (Anderson et al., 2011; Genova & Tazzioli, 2016).

As a conceptual approach to investigating vulnerabilities and barriers to support, I utilise Mahler and Pessar's model 'gendered geographies of power' (2001). This model posits that individuals are embedded in a range of intersecting power hierarchies, created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other stratifying factors. The dynamics operate on a variety of scales – from the intimate scale of the body to the grand scale of global geographies, affecting the types and degrees of agency that people can exert across national and transnational terrains. This intersectional approach (Mahler et al., 2015) shows how women's scope for agency when leaving an abusive partner depends not only on their position within their marital relationship; it is also contingent on, for example, their embedding in class-based hierarchies, their position in natal family relations, and on their immigration status and rights (Chaudhuri et al., 2014). Before proceeding to the analysis, the next section discusses data and method.

Data and method

The article utilises data from a research project conducted between 2021 and 2024 investigating exposure to abuse and possibilities for support among ethnic minority women in a selected part of Denmark. The material comprises 18 interviews with IPV survivors, recruited through local NGOs, network contacts, and snowballing, and 32 interviews with relevant frontline workers. The women were aged between 29 and 79 (mean = 42 years) and had all suffered IPV during a heterosexual marriage. Five of the women were born in Denmark, six arrived during childhood, and seven came as adults. Reflecting the broader immigration pattern to Denmark, the 18 women had

family ties to Iraq, Turkey, Palestine/Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Somalia. The IPV survivor interviews were organised in two parts: First, inspired by Schütze's biographical interview approach (Hollstein, 2019; Schütze, 2008), the women were asked to tell the story of their marriage and divorce. Questions were kept to a minimum, enabling women to construct their own biographical narratives (Bertaux, 2003). Second, the interviews utilised a semi-structured guide with questions on family issues, and on access to formal and informal support. Informants were instructed not to go into details about abuse experiences as to protect them from becoming emotionally upset.

The 32 frontline workers were recruited by myself or by research assistants from different sectors. Informants included municipality social workers, health sector employees, and shelter personnel. These interviews had a semi-structured format, with questions centreing on informants' experiences of providing help to ethnic minority women in need.

This research follows the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity as well as institutional guidelines at VIVE - the Danish Center for Social Science Research. Regarding informed consent, care was taken to explain the research process to informants, and they were informed of their right to retract their interview at any time. With informants' permission, all interviews were recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed. To protect confidentiality, all informants have been given pseudonyms. Geographical information, including country of origin, has been omitted, and particular details regarding profession or number of children, for example, may have been altered.

I took an abductive approach to the analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), going back and forth between the rich empirical material and different theoretical approaches. In a number of steps, I arrived at the present analysis, centreing on unpacking the tensions between the national framework for Danish frontline support and the transnational lives of the women in question, exploring the implications this tension holds for ethnic minority women's access to formal support when they experience interpersonal violence.

Results

The experiences of both women and frontline workers were diverse and included positive as well as negative experiences with support provisions. To explore barriers to support, this analysis concentrates on negative experiences and is divided into three sections, each exploring embedding in gendered geographies of power at different scales. The sections unpack, first, how embedding in intergenerational relations in private space constrains women's autonomy, and second, how insecure embedding relative to the nation state can prevent access to outside support. Third, the analysis brings out how strategic mobility across geographical borders can also be utilised to limit women's access to formal support.

Embedding in intergenerational relations creating barriers to support

Gender strongly shapes family relationships of power, both within and across generational divides. Evidently, in heterosexual couples the relationship between husbands and wives is central for experiences of IPV (Bjørnholt, 2021; Stark, 2007). In this section, however, I focus on another type of family relationships: the intergenerational relations between women and their parents and parents-in-law. Much of the interaction in such relations unfolds within private space and thus outside the view of Danish frontline workers. An exception to this rule, however, is health nurses, who make postnatal home visits to ensure the well-being of mothers and babies. An interviewed health nurse said the following about such visits:

> Sometimes you sense things. For example, that [the ethnic minority woman] is under some kind of surveillance. And the mother-in-law is always present. But what do you do? How do you put such a concern into words? If the mother tells you that everything is all right?

The health nurse points to barriers to assessing the situation. While she might '*sense things,*' it is difficult to determine whether there is indeed cause for concern: a daughter-in-law's subservient position may silence her in the presence of a more powerful mother-in-law (Kandiyoti, 1988). Similarly, when a young mother claims that '*everything is all right,*' this response may also reflect her vulnerable position relative to the powerful Danish state: ethnic minorities often fear that disclosing hardships to frontline workers could trigger child protection interventions (Haga, 2014; Johansen, 2022). Another possible explanation for the reported interaction in the household is that the nurse's concerns are unfounded – the situation could indeed be fine, with the nurse's suspicions stemming from internalised culturalist stereotypes (Eliassi, 2017). This scenario would align with observations of 'coercive concern' toward young ethnic minority women observed elsewhere in the Danish public sector (Jaffe-Walter, 2016). The nurse's uncertainty thus highlights two key challenges: the difficulty of accurately assessing support needs and the complex navigation of private/public boundaries in both accessing and providing formal support.

From the other side of the interface, interviews with ethnic minority women bring out how help from the Danish authorities can indeed be out of reach for women who encounter problems while embedded in transnationally anchored family dynamics within private spaces. One example comes from Bahija. Partially raised in Denmark in a refugee family, she entered an arranged marriage with a man she hardly knew. Immediately after the wedding, Bahija realised that her husband just wanted her to '*cook and clean and be [sexually] available.*' Strongly regretting the marriage, she went to her father, telling him that she wanted a divorce. Her father, however, told her to remain with her husband, stating that divorce would '*bring shame upon the family,*' and that if the couple divorced, people would doubt Bahija's premarital virginity. According to norms in Bahija's family's country of origin, such doubts would damage the family's reputation, which is intimately tied to the chaste conduct of female family members (Khan, 2018; Uskul et al., 2019). Consequently, Bahija remained with her demanding and abusive husband for years. Her disadvantaged position in her natal family power geography thus barred her from accessing frontline support, even though such support was available:

> The problem was that I needed to get my family over on my side. They were the ones I had to convince that I could get divorced – that they should help me. The municipality told me that I could just get a divorce. I have a friend who is a social worker. She told me: "*If you want, I can help you go underground.*" But that was not what I wanted.

Help to '*go underground*' can be construed as support to leave both the private space and embedding in the ethnic minority family context. In providing this type of help, the authorities proposed to relocate Bahija elsewhere on Danish territory. This would entail a rupture of centrally important familial relations, however, leading Bahija to turn down the offer. As no other help was available, she remained in her abusive marriage for years. Bahija's experience aligns with calls for developing new types of social work interventions to address family discord in ethnic minority families – help provisions beyond the present individualistic solutions that commonly entail severing all ties (Dullum, 2020; Fineran & Kohli, 2020). Becoming better able to accommodate such varied needs of increasingly diverse, transnationally embedded populations is a central challenge of social work today (Julkunen et al., 2023; Tan & Choo, 2023). In a similar situation, facing both marital hardships and lack of parental support for divorce, the young woman Silaah acted differently. Silaah's father had forced her to marry at a young age. Silah described that after the wedding, she was beaten:

> I got a bloody nose and bruises. Then I went to my father, but he just said: "*That serves you right.*"[…] Then I packed a bag and went to a women's shelter. I was moved to [shelter in another town because her husband tried to track her down]. All the time they told me: "*You have to be brave. You must face that you will be alone for the rest of your life.*"

The availability of a women's shelter was central for Silaah's ability to leave the private space of her abusive marriage (Molter, 2020). Similar to Bahija, Silaah's situation was complicated by her father's

resistance to her divorcing her abusive husband, a key aspect in 'honor'-based abuse (Bates, 2021; Olsson & Bergman, 2022). Silaah was also offered support in severing family relations, to make a 'fresh start' elsewhere in Denmark. Such support can be helpful for some, and several frontline workers indeed told of providing women with this type of help. This individualistic solution may, however, be unsatisfactory for women who are both deeply embedded in large family networks, and who are themselves visible minorities, marginally placed in mainstream society (Burman et al., 2004; Jenkins, 2011). Silaah in fact utilised this type of formal support: To escape the wrath of both her ex-husband and her father she lived '*underground*' for two years. In the interview, she explained that doing so was very hard: '*I felt very empty. I missed my family. So I went back to them.*' To return to her natal family, however, Silaah had to accept her subservient position in generational power relations and pay the price of entering another marriage arranged by her father. Also an ill-fated one, this marriage came to extend Silaah's exposure to IPV.

The experiences of women such as Bahija and Silaah reveal a mismatch between their needs and available help provisions. On the one hand, social work provisions focus on the women as individuals who can act with full independence, including leaving abusive relationships (Green et al., 2024; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2022). On the one hand, severing relations to abusive partners may not end the abuse if other family members, including parents, continue to enforce traditional beliefs from their home country that women should be submissive and obedient (Bates, 2021; Bredal et al., 2020). This mismatch between needs and help provisions can keep women from seeking out much-needed formal support, making them remain in abusive relations in the seclusion of the private home.

Embedding in nation-state power relations creating barriers to support

Regarding embedding in webs of power on different scales, Erez et al. (2009) point out that we must attend to 'immigrant status' as an important analytical frame that is separate from ethnicity or race. We must thus pay attention to the relationship to the nation state if we are to examine structural harm. National laws in Denmark posit that women on a marriage migration visa can face deportation if they leave their husbands. This interconnection between embedding in the marriage and in the nation state can seriously reduce abused women's scope for agency. The underlying context is that surviving as a divorcee can be difficult and even dangerous in many countries of origin (Nasser-Eddin & Mhaissen, 2020; Yazici, 2012). Such fears can prevent women from seeking help from official support services available to them. A shelter worker described this situation:

> I commonly hear women say "*My husband says that if I leave him, I will never see my children again. That I have no right to have my children. That I will be sent home, and I will not be allowed to bring my children with me.*" […] We don't see that [=deportations] that often. But if you're completely controlled by a man and you believe what he tells you, because you're not allowed to talk to anyone else, how can you know what the rules are?

The quotation exemplifies how women's weak embedding in nation-state geographies of power can enable husbands to '*weaponize borders*' – to '*threaten, coerce and control women in different ways, most often with impunity*' (Segrave, 2021, p. 26). Such threats can serve to retain women in subservient positions within private space. Over the past two-and-a-half decade, the position of marriage migrants has become increasingly precarious as legislation has become ever-more restrictive in Denmark and elsewhere in Northwestern Europe (Bonjour & Block, 2016; Liversage, 2025). Several frontline workers reported that they regularly encountered weakly positioned marriage migrants who were very difficult to help. One municipal social worker described meeting women, who

> just stay [in abusive relationships]. They don't feel that they have a choice. I can counsel them for a hundred years, and it won't make any difference. Because they ask me [about residency permits]. And then I have to say: "*Well, we can't do anything about that.*" It's a frustrating situation … It makes them stay [in the abusive relationship] much longer. And they have a really hard time leaving and doing the things I advise them to do.

This intertwinement between power geometries on different scales in effect prevents women from drawing on the support otherwise available as access to permanent and secure residency has become increasingly difficult. Part of broader exclusionary changes, these developments both limit growing groups of ethnic minority women's options for seeking help, and complicate social work with such women.

Cross-border mobility preventing access to Danish frontline support

So far, I have discussed how women's embedding in power relations on different scales can diminish their ability to access help within Danish nation-state borders. Cross-border mobility can further complicate the situation. Examples of strategic use of cross-border mobility in ethnic minority family conflicts include parents relocating disobedient offspring (Tiilikainen, 2011) and husbands sending discontented wives back to their home country (Bredal, 2023; Liversage, 2022). In both cases, geographical mobility alters intra-family power dynamics: In Scandinavia, the state supports individual rights, including the rights of weakly positioned individuals such as women and children. In, for example, the Middle East, the family plays a more prominent role in society with less state intrusion, and weakly positioned family members hold fewer rights (Moghadam, 2020; Yazici, 2012). Hence, moving a family conflict from Scandinavia to the Middle East circumscribes women's and children's access to outside support, enabling parents and/or husbands to regain the upper hand in family geographies of power.[1] With jurisdictions circumscribed by state boundaries, such mobility leaves Scandinavian frontline workers with few, if any, options for providing support.

Bahija's life story reveals such links between family conflict, cross-border mobility, and the availability of support. After years in a bad marriage, she gained her father's support for divorcing her husband and left him. She learned that, as is generally the case in Denmark, both parents were to share child custody. This alarmed Bahija as her ex-husband could easily get their children due to their '*[Middle Eastern] passports and citizenships and take them out [of Denmark] and no one would be able to stop him*.' Bahija asked local frontline workers, including the police, about her options for gaining full custody to reduce the risk of child abduction. However, she learned that there were no grounds for changing custody arrangements. This response made Bahija '*cry for a whole week […] if my children disappeared, I would die*.' Her experience thus exemplifies a lack of nation-state support for the cross-border issues she was facing (Schnitzer-Reese, 2004; Schrooten, 2021).

Growing experience with these types of cases is, however, leading to changes in Danish policy and legislation. Thus, since 2018, a small number of specialised 'security consultants' have gained some experience in working with cross-border family conflicts. One security consultant describes a case that substantiates Bahija's fear of losing her children:

> I just had a case where the father abducted two children […] He had them out of Denmark for several years and turned them against their mother – something which is also harmful to the children. While they have in fact returned to Denmark today [due to the father's financial problems], they do not want to have any contact with her.

The case shows that little can be done about an abduction as long as the father keeps the children outside Danish territory. The security consultant expanded on this issue using Somalia as an example. There, husbands or parents can place an exit ban, preventing an abducted child or a 'dumped' wife from leaving the country. When that happens

> there is nothing we can do. Even if we ensure that the papers are in order from the Danish side, they have to take the risky journey themselves. Because we don't go down there and pick them up. But how can we make sure that they get the passports? They have to travel to Nairobi [in neighboring Kenya] to get the passports – and that's impossible. It's a Catch-22. In reality, once they're out there, they are hard to help.

While they are in Denmark, weakly positioned family members can get support from frontline workers of the welfare state. In contrast, in Somalia, for example, more strongly positioned family

members can benefit from state support. One woman, Parvin, described her fears of being 'dumped' abroad. During her marriage, she experienced that her husband – who rarely hit her in Denmark – would beat her when they were on holiday in the Middle East. She described that '*if he said that we should stay in [country of origin], what could I do? It was just so stressful, year after year*.' After all, Parvin knew that help in Denmark would be available if she entered the public space to gain it – an act she indeed ended up performing. Abroad, however, her access to outside support would be extremely limited. This weakened her position vis-à-vis her husband, who seemingly took advantage of the situation.

A last example of how boundary-spanning social processes within transnational social spaces can impede women's access to formal Danish support comes from Darya, who came to Denmark when she was 19. Even though she entered the country as a refugee, in reality, she came to marry a young immigrant in Denmark. He had health problems and lived with his parents, and Darya settled in the extended household. For several years, she was not allowed to leave the household, was required to do all domestic work and suffered abuse. In Denmark, participation in language tuition is obligatory, in part to protect (female) migrants from being isolated. However, Darya's in-laws managed to exempt her from tuition by ensuring that when '*the municipality called me for appointments, the family members were always the ones doing the translating. When we were supposed to go there, they told me*: "You have to be sad and cry and cry" […] *They were smart*.' Darya's life of extreme control and exploitation demonstrates how marriage migrants may end up in situations that mirror those of human trafficking victims (Lyneham & Richards, 2014; Tyldum & Tveit, 2008). In Australia, social workers conduct one-on-one welfare checks to ensure the safety and well-being of marriage migrants several months after their arrival (Lyneham & Richards, 2014). Similar to Danish health nurses, such home visits can provide contact with isolated individuals. As Darya's experiences show, however, it is crucial to ensure space for confidential conversations, and to avoid using family members as translators.

Five years after her arrival, in a fit of defiance and desperation, Darya left the house. This led to her in-laws sending her to stay with family elsewhere in the EU to 'cool off.' After a week, Darya's in-laws called her, saying that they had effectuated a divorce and cancelled her residency permit, and that her only option was to return to her parents in the Middle East – without her two children.

If Darya had done so, I would never have spoken with her. Instead, Darya – an illiterate woman who spoke only her mother tongue and knew hardly anything about life in Europe – managed to return to Denmark on her own. She stayed at a woman's shelter, where she was helped by Danish frontline workers and regained both her children and the papers and permits she had lost. Her story thus exemplifies the very positive formal support that can also be available to ethnic minority women in Denmark. However, Darya's in-laws did not give up easily, and they took the conflict beyond the Danish borders:

> They called my friends and my family [in the Middle East]. [They said:] "*You must tell Darya to hand the children over to us or we will kill her – or we will kill her family*" […] They paid someone to beat up my father [in the Middle East] really badly. He ended up in hospital for many days […] I got very scared and very sick.

Similar to the cases involving Bahija and Silaah, the Danish authorities also offered Darya the individualistic solution of a 'fresh start':

> The municipality tells me: "*We can change your name and help you move to another place in the country.*" But I don't think it will help. There is still his family and my family – and they beat up each other. If I move, they might kill each other. So I say no.

With her mental and physical health deteriorating, Darya ended up handing her children over to the municipality, who placed them in an institution. With this drastic action, Darya managed to dissipate the pressure she was under and protect her family abroad. A year later, she got back on her feet and wanted to have her children back. To Darya's dismay, however, at that point the municipality considered it better for the children to remain in institutionalised care.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on interviews with both ethnic minority IPV survivors and frontline support workers, this article reveals foundational tensions between – on the one hand – frontline workers' embeddedness in the nation state and – on the other hand – ethnic minority women's transnational contexts. The article contributes to the ongoing development of transnational social work by unpacking the centrality of survivors' embedding in gendered geographies of power (Mahler & Pessar, 2001), and the consequences such embedding can have for access to support. Thus, for some ethnic minority women, barriers to support stem from their embeddedness in subordinate positions within familial power relations where understandings of family relationships differ significantly from those prevalent in Denmark's individualistic – and relatively gender-equal – society. Linked to the reality of 'honor'-based violence (Baianstovu & Strid, 2024; Olsson & Bergman, 2022), some parents may expose daughters to ostracism (and/or violence) if they disobey instructions to remain with their husbands even when husbands are abusive.

Given the fundamental importance of natal family relations to individual identity and belonging, such family dynamics can effectively prevent women from leaving the home and accessing formal support in public space. Furthermore, the common individualistic support solutions available (where women may be expected to cut all familial ties) cannot sufficiently meet the needs of the target group (Dullum, 2020; Fineran & Kohli, 2020). Furthermore, the ways in which the private-public boundary keeps some women from contact with support providers altogether make the transnational skills and understandings of home-visiting professionals such as health nurses crucial. Such nurses can potentially become vital points of contact for otherwise isolated women.

On a supra-national level, power dynamics may fortify structures at the intimate scale of the private sphere. Such higher-level dynamics arise from the fact that leaving a household may negatively affect the visa status of marriage migrants. Due to significant disparities in opportunities and resources available to divorced women in Denmark versus in their countries of origin, some women face an extreme dilemma: they must either endure abusive relationships or leave Denmark entirely. This intertwinement circumscribes women's access to formal help and enables perpetrators to 'weaponize borders' (Segrave, 2021). Hence the 'deportation turn', increasing insecurities about residency, affects processes of help-seeking, making the state complicit in some ethnic minority women's long-lasting exposure to domestic abuse. Nation-state boundaries are also central to the strategic deployment of transnational mobility to block women's access to formal support. Such barriers can be created both by relocating women to other countries, by moving significant others (e.g. children), and by inflicting harm on loved ones in distant parts of the world (Bredal, 2023; Liversage, 2022).

The analysis exemplifies the complexities of nation-state provisions of formal help to vulnerable individuals embedded in transnational social fields. Both the boundary separating public from private space and the boundaries circumscribing national spaces can be implicated in processes that diminish abused women's access to much-needed support (Schrooten, 2021). Improving the ability to address such multi-scalar power dynamics is a crucial part of developing transnational social work in increasingly diverse societies.

Note

1. Power struggles in family conflicts are just one of several reasons for transnational family mobility. Other reasons include supporting language learning and educational achievements (Johnsdotter, 2015; Reisel et al., 2018) and evading Northwestern Europe's perceived negative influences on family life (Yasin Abdi, 2023).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by The Danish Victims Fund [grant number 21-610-00140].

Notes on contributor

Anika Liversage, PhD, is a professor with special responsibilities at *VIVE – the Danish Centre for Social Science Research* in Copenhagen, Denmark. Her interests centre on issues of gender and power in ethnic minority families, especially topics such as marriages, divorces, and intergenerational relations, including care for older individuals. Anika Liversage is a qualitative researcher, often using life history interviews. She does some of her interviews in Turkish, which she speaks well after having lived four years in Turkey. She has published in journals such as *Violence Against Women, International Migration Review, Aging and Society, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Global Networks,* and *Work, Employment and Society*. She also does commissioned work for different Danish ministries. Awarded a Carlsberg Foundation Monograph Fellowships, she is currently finishing a book on ethnic minorities, abuse and divorce.

References

Alaggia, R., Maiter, S., & Jenney, A. (2017). In whose words? Struggles and strategies of service providers working with immigrant clients with limited language abilities in the violence against women sector and child protection services. *Child & Family Social Work*, *22*(1), 472–481. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12266

Anderson, B., Gibney, M. J., & Paoletti, E. (2011). Citizenship, deportation and the boundaries of belonging. *Citizenship Studies*, *15*(5), 547–563. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2011.583787

Anitha, S., Roy, A., & Yalamarty, H. (2018). Gender, migration, and exclusionary citizenship regimes: conceptualizing transnational abandonment of wives as a form of violence against women. *Violence Against Women*, *24*(7), 747–774. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801217720693

Baianstovu, R., & Strid, S. (2024). Complexities facing social work: Honor-based violence as lived reality and stereotype. *Journal of Social Work*, *24*(4), 552–570. https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173231225421

Bates, L. (2021). Honor-based abuse in England and Wales: Who does what to whom? *Violence Against Women*, *27*(10), 1774–1795. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220952168

Bertaux, D. (2003). The usefulness of life stories for a realist and meaningful sociology. In R. Humphrey, R. Miller, & E. Zdravomyslova (Eds.), *Biographical research in Eastern Europe – Altered lives and broken biographies* (pp. 39–52). Ashgate.

Bjørnholt, M. (2021). Domestic violence and abuse through a feminist lens. In J. Devaney, C. Bradbury-Jones, R. J. Macy, C. Øverlien, & S. Holt (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of domestic violence and abuse* (pp. 11–16). Routledge.

Bø, B. P. (2015). Social work in a multicultural society: New challenges and needs for competence. *International Social Work*, *58*(4), 562–574. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872814550114

Bonjour, S., & Block, L. (2016). Ethnicizing citizenship, questioning membership. Explaining the decreasing family migration rights of citizens in Europe. *Citizenship Studies*, *20*(6–7), 779–794. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2016.1191429

Bose, C. E. (2015). Patterns of global gender inequalities and regional gender regimes. *Gender and Society*, *29*(6), 767–791. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215607849

Bredal, A. (2023). Transnational regimes of family violence: When violence against women crosses borders. In H. Bows & B. Fileborn (Eds.), *Geographies of gender-based violence - a multi-disciplinary perspective* (pp. 150–164). Bristol University Press.

Bredal, A., Eggebø, H., & Eriksen, A. M. A. (2020). *Vold i nære relationer i et mangfoldigt Norge*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Burman, E., Smailes, S. L., & Chantler, K. (2004). "Culture" as a barrier to service provision and delivery: Domestic violence services for minoritized women. *Critical Social Policy*, *24*(3), 332–357. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018304044363

Chaudhuri, M., Thimm, V., & Mahler, S. (2014). Gendered geographies of power: Their value for analyzing gender across transnational spaces. In J. Riefgraf & B. Gruhlich (Eds.), *Geschlecht und transnationale Räume* (pp. 192–207). Westfälisches Dampfboot.

Dullum, J. (2020). *Sikkerhet gjennom familiearbeid.Et samarbeidsprosjekt mellom politi og familievern ved Stovner politistasjon*. NOVA.

Dutt, A. (2018). Lived experiences of women facing domestic violence in culturally specific ways in which women experience DV in India. *People: International Journal of Social Sciences*, *4*(2), 212–228. https://doi.org/10.5042/eihsc.2010.0145

EIGE. (2023). *Gender equality index 2023*. European Institute for Gender Equality. https://doi.org/10.2839/43292

Eliassi, B. (2017). Conceptions of immigrant integration and racism among social workers in Sweden. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *28*(1), 6–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2017.1249242

Erez, E., Adelman, M., & Gregory, C. (2009). Intersections of immigration and domestic violence. *Feminist Criminology*, *4*(1), 32–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085108325413
Farris, S. R. (2017). *In the name of women's rights. The rise of femonationalism*. Duke University Press.
Fernbrant, C., Essén, B., Östergren, P. O., & Cantor-Graae, E. (2011). Perceived threat of violence and exposure to physical violence against foreign-born women: A Swedish population-based study. *Women's Health Issues*, *21*(3), 206–213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2010.12.001
Fineran, S., & Kohli, H. K. (2020). Muslim refugee women's perspectives on intimate partner violence. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *23*(3), 199–213. https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2020.1742839
Genova, N. D., & Tazzioli, M. (2016). Europe/crisis: New keywords of "the crisis" in and of "Europe". *Near Futures Online*, *1*(March), 1–45.
Ghafournia, N., & Easteal, P. (2018). Are immigrant women visible in Australian domestic violence reports that potentially influence policy? *Laws*, *7*(4), 32. https://doi.org/10.3390/laws7040032
Green, J., Satyen, L., & Toumbourou, J. W. (2024). Influence of cultural norms on formal service engagement among survivors of intimate partner violence: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, *25*(1), 738–751. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231162971
Haga, R. J. (2014). "Freedom has destroyed the Somali family": Somali parents' experiences of epistemic injustice and its influence on their raising of Swedish Muslims. In M. Sedgwick (Ed.), *Making European Muslims: Religious socialization among young Muslims in Scandinavia and Western Europe* (pp. 38–55). Taylor & Francis.
Hernes, H. (1987). *Welfare state and woman power: Essays in state feminism*. Norwegian University Press.
Hollstein, B. (2019). What autobiographical narratives tell us about the life course. Contributions of qualitative sequential analytical methods. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *41*(September 2018), 100248. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2018.10.001
Innes, A., Carlisle, S., Manzur, H., Cook, E., Corsi, J., & Lewis, N. V. (2024). Prevalence of physical violence against people in insecure migration status: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS One*, *19*(3 March), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0300189
Jaffe-Walter, R. (2016). *Coercive concern: Nationalism, liberalism, and the schooling of Muslim youth*. Stanford University Press.
Jenkins, R. (2011). *Being Danish – Paradoxes of identity in everyday life*. Museum Tusculanum Press.
Johansen, M. L. E. (2022). Fraught parenting: Immigrant parents' chronic double-bind in Denmark. *Ethnography*, *23*(3), 404–423. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138119892018
Johnsdotter, S. (2015). Dumpning av europeisk-somaliska barn? Om familjer, föräldrar och barn i en transnationell kontext. *European Journal of Social Work*, *18*(1), 81–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2013.844682
Julkunen, I., Ruch, G., & Nurmi, A. (2023). Social work in a superdiverse society: An exploration of cooperation in professional practice. *European Journal of Social Work*, *26*(4), 612–625. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2066634
Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, *2*(3), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004
Keskinen, S. (2009). 'Honour'-related violence and Nordic nation-building. In S. Keskinen, S. Tuori, S. Irni, & D. Mulinari (Eds.), *Complying with colonialism: Gender, race and ethnicity in the Nordic region* (pp. 257–272). Ashgate.
Khan, R. (2018). Introduction to the special issue on honour-based abuse, violence and killings. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, *10*(4), 237–238. https://doi.org/10.1108/JACPR-10-2018-360
Kiamanesh, P., & Hauge, M. I. (2019). "We are not weak, we just experience domestic violence"—Immigrant women's experiences of encounters with service providers as a result of domestic violence. *Child and Family Social Work*, *24*(2), 301–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12615
Kiram, U., & Stronks, K. (2016). *Preserving and improving the mental health of refugees and asylum seeker – Literature review for the health council of The Netherlands*. University of Amsterdam.
Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society. *International Migration Review*, *38*(3), 1002–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x www.jstor.org/stable/27645424
Liversage, A. (2022). Abducting children abroad: Gender, power, and transnational mobility in immigrant family conflicts. *Violence Against Women*, *28*(5), 1139–1157. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801221999431
Liversage, A. (2025). The Danish "paradigm shift" – Consequences for female refugees and marriage migrants. In J. Schwörner (Ed.), *New Danish paradigms on asylum and integration. Effects and challenges* (pp. 28–40). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
Lyneham, S., & Richards, K. (2014). *Human trafficking involving marriage and partner migration to Australia*. Research and Public Policy Series 124. Australian Institute of Criminology.
Maher, J., & Segrave, M. (2018). Family violence risk, migration status and 'vulnerability': Hearing the voices of immigrant women. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, *2*(3), 503–518. https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15375304047178
Mahler, S. J., Chaudhuri, M., & Patil, V. (2015). Scaling intersectionality: Advancing feminist analysis of transnational families. *Sex Roles*, *73*(3–4), 100–112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0506-9
Mahler, S. J., & Pessar, P. R. (2001). Gendered geographies of power: Analyzing gender across transnational spaces. *Identities*, *7*(4), 441–459. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289x.2001.9962675

Moghadam, V. M. (2020). Gender regimes in the Middle East and North Africa: The power of feminist movements. *Social Politics*, *27*(3), 467–485. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa019
Molter, S. (2020). *Violence against women. On the implementation of the Istanbul convention in Denmark* (Issue July). Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe.
Nasser-Eddin, N., & Mhaissen, R. (2020). *The gendered journey of return – The case of Syrian women in Lebanon*. SAWA fro Development and Aid and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
Okeke-Ihejirika, P., Tetreault, B., Punjani, N., & Olukotun, M. (2022). Intimate partner violence interventions within immigrant populations: A scoping review of the G7 nations, including Canada. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, *54*(2), 67–97. https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2022.0014
Olivier-Mensah, C., Schröer, W., & Schweppe, C. (2017). Social work transnationally revisited. *Transnational Social Review*, *7*(2), 123–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1317983
Olsson, H., & Bergman, A. (2022). From silence to recognition: Swedish social services and the handling of honor-based violence. *European Journal of Social Work*, *25*(2), 198–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1882395
Rajkumar, R. P. (2023). Cultural collectivism, intimate partner violence, and women's mental health: An analysis of data from 151 countries. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *2023*(8), 1–11.
Razack, S. H. (2021). Should feminists stop talking about culture in the context of violence against Muslim women? The case of "honour killing". *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, *12*(1), 31–48. https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs121202120082
Reisel, L., Bredal, A., & Lidén, H. (2018). Transnational schooling among children of immigrants in Norway – The significance of Islam. In M. Bozorgmehr & P. Kasinitz (Eds.), *Growing up Muslim in Europe and the United States* (pp. 153–171). Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315279091-9
Schnitzer-Reese, E. A. (2004). International child abduction to non-Hague convention countries: The need for an international family court. *Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights*, *2*(1), 1–19. http://www.insightmag.com/main.cfm?include=detail&storyid=215281
Schrooten, M. (2021). Transnational social work: Challenging and crossing borders and boundaries. *Journal of Social Work*, *21*(5), 1163–1181. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320949389
Schrooten, M. (2024). Bringing the transnational into social work. In M. Fauser & X. Bada (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of transnational studies* (pp. 143–154). Routledge.
Schütze, F. (2008). Biography analysis on the empirical base of autobiographical narratives: How to analyze autobiographical narrative interviews. *European Studies on Inequalities and Social Cohesion* (1/2; 3/4), 153–298, 6–77.
Segrave, M. (2021). Temporary migration and family violence: How perpetrators weaponise borders. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, *10*(4), 26–38. https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.1995
Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control*. Oxford University Press.
Statistics Denmark. (2023). *Indvandrere i Danmark 2023*. Danmarks Statistik. www.dst.dk/publ/indvandrereidk
Stöckl, H., & Sorenson, S. B. (2024). Violence against women as a global public health issue. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *45*(1), 277–294. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-060722-025138
Tan, E., & Choo, H. (2023). An exploratory study on the challenges faced by social workers working with transnational families in Singapore. *International Social Work*, *66*(5), 1483–1496. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728211073935
Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive analysis: Theorizing qualitative research*. University of Chicago Press.
Tiilikainen, M. (2011). Failed diaspora: Experiences of Dhaqan Celis and mentally Ill returnees in Somaliland. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, *20*(1), 71–89.
Timshel, I., Montgomery, E., & Dalgaard, N. T. (2017). A systematic review of risk and protective factors associated with family related violence in refugee families. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *70*, 315–330. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.023
Tyldum, G., & Tveit, M. (2008). *Someone who cares – A study of vulnerability and risk in marriage migration from Russia and Thailand to Norway*. FAFO-report 2008:26. www.fafo.no/english/
Uskul, A. K., Cross, S. E., Gunsoy, C., & Gul, P. (2019). Cultures of honor. In S. Kitayam & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 793–821). The Guilford Press.
Walby, S. (2020). Varieties of gender regimes. *Social Politics*, *27*(3), 414–431. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa018
WHO. (2021). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018. *World Health Organization*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026681
Yasin Abdi, A. (2023). Moral geographies and their application among diasporic Somalis'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2278397
Yazici, B. (2012). The return to the family: Welfare, state and politics of the family in Turkey. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *85*(1), 103–140. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2012.0013
Zakar, R., Zakar, M. Z., & Krämer, A. (2012). Voices of strength and struggle: Women's coping strategies against spousal violence in Pakistan. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *27*(16), 3268–3298. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260512441257