

Having the Lower Hand

Having the Lower Hand—Investigating Interaction in the Life Course Narratives of Immigrant Women Exposed to Partner Abuse

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Abstract: Research has documented the considerable hardships immigrant women often face if they want to leave abusive relationships, but the cumulative impacts of such experiences have received insufficient scholarly attention. In response, this study investigates women's difficulties leaving abusive relationships based on life story interviews with 35 immigrant women who experienced partner abuse. Almost all the women originated from “patriarchal belt” countries in, for example, the Middle East and arrived in Denmark as adults. Using a model of gendered geographies of power, this study examines key interview passages in which the women use dramatized speech to tell about their younger selves' interactions with significant others. These dramatized episodes of interactions emerge as crucial for the interviewees to communicate why they remained in abusive relationships for years and how most finally managed to leave their husbands. The narrated episodes reveal how the women's frequent lack of success in various interactional situations can be attributed to women “having the lower hand”—holding disadvantaged positions in the familial, social, and national hierarchies of power. These hierarchies reinforce each other, for example, when insecure residency status limits immigrant women's options to solicit help from Danish society. The analysis demonstrates that—in contrast to the stereotype of the abused immigrant woman as a passive victim—micro- and macro-level processes may work together to undermine immigrant women's possibilities to act independently at important junctures in their lives. The results also stress the importance that frontline workers have sufficient understanding of immigrant women's predicament and the ability to extend qualified and timely support. Such support can be crucial for abused immigrant women to become able to move away from their violent home environments.

Key words: domestic violence; intimate partner violence; domestic abuse; immigrant family conflict; immigrant divorce; life story interviews; biographical method.

Introduction

Intimate partner or spousal abuse against women is a pervasive global phenomenon that affects many immigrant women (Adams & Campbell, 2012; Fernbrant et al., 2011). Immigrant women may be especially vulnerable to abuse due to their lack of supportive social relationships, limited host country language skills, precarious legal positions, and combinations of these and other factors (Ghafournia & Easteal, 2018; Kiamanesh & Hauge, 2019). Although the literature has documented many factors contributing to immigrant women's abuse experiences, the cumulative impacts have received insufficient research attention (Gonçalves & Matos, 2016, p. 707). Without adequate understanding of these cumulative impacts, immigrant women who remain in abusive relationships may be stereotyped as passive (Kapur, 2002; Ahmad et al., 2009), and their compliance with patriarchal constraints may draw the most attention (Chaudhuri et al., 2014). Heeding the above call of Gonçalves and Matos (2016), the aim of this research was to expand understanding of the reasons why immigrant women might take a long time to leave abusive relationships and what support might help them succeed in moving on to a life without violence. This study was based on life story interviews with 35 immigrant women from the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia who all suffered spousal abuse.

The next sections, first, outline research on immigrant women's vulnerability to abuse; second, present the theoretical framework of gendered geographies of power; third, describes how the life story interviews were made and, fourth, presents the analysis of the empirical material. The article ends with a discussion and conclusion.

Immigrant Women's Vulnerability to Abuse

Almost two decades ago, Raj and Silverman (2002) published their now-classic article "The Roles of Culture, Context, and Legal Immigrant Status on Intimate Partner Violence," which remains a fit framework for understanding the complex challenges that may adversely affect abused immigrant women. First, Raj and Silverman (2002) pointed out that while male violence against women is a global phenomenon, culture plays a role in the particular configurations of this violence. Women who migrate from some parts of the world—especially if they have few socioeconomic resources—may have limited control over their

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entry into and exit from marriage (Gangoli, 2017; Payton, 2015). For example, in the Middle Eastern, North African, and Southeast Asian countries Caldwell (1978) termed the “patriarchal belt,” women’s sexuality may be tightly controlled, resulting in difficulties for them to initiate divorce (Akpinar, 2003; Hague et al., 2013). Such home country norms and practices often remain salient after migration and prompt unhappy wives’ personal networks and relatives to ask them to show patience rather than to support them in leaving their abusive husbands. In immigrant communities, women often bear the blame for marital breakdown, and divorced women may experience stigma and exclusion (Das, 2010; Qureshi, 2016).

A second factor relevant to immigrant women’s exposure to abuse is the migration context. Recent immigrants—certainly to a small country such as Denmark—rarely have host country language proficiency, and some are unable to gain it over time (Choi et al., 2012). A lack of linguistic skills commonly limits immigrants’ knowledge of both host country legislation and the social support measures available. Furthermore, some immigrant wives find that their husbands and in-laws deliberately block their access to both new networks and language lessons (Abraham, 2000; Erez & Harper, 2018; Rees & Pease, 2007). For refugees, war and traumatic experiences often comprise part of the migration context, and studies have shown that such difficult experiences may contribute to increased occurrence of family abuse (Kiram & Stronks, 2016; Timshel et al., 2017; Zannettino, 2012). In addition, immigration may entail economic disadvantage, increasing the risk of intimate partner violence (Fernbrant et al., 2011; Rees & Pease, 2007), and exposure to discrimination and racist attitudes, impeding immigrants’ options to seek help in the host society (Chantler et al., 2018; Hague et al., 2010; Hayes, 2013). In combination with the stresses of uprooting and resettlement, the economic and social support that host countries might extend to immigrant women may increase husbands’ desire to control their wives to maintain a sense of male superiority (Fisher, 2013; Zannettino, 2012). Such support may also shift the power balance between spouses in other ways, enabling wives to challenge male dominance and leave unwanted marriages (Darvishpour, 1999; Kleist, 2010).

A third factor that may shape immigrant women’s exposure to partner abuse is legal immigration status. Due to large power differentials in spouses’ rights to remain in the host country in the case of separation, women may accept abuse rather than risk deportation (Adams & Campbell, 2012; Del Real, 2018; McWilliams et al., 2015). Limitations on immigrants’ access to social protection may pressure women to remain in abusive relationships (Anitha, 2010; Mirza, 2016). Although some countries have passed legislation

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to improve immigrant women's ability to retain their visas if they leave abusive husbands, these laws often do not match the needs of the women it intends to help (Gray et al., 2014; Sharma & Gill, 2010). These combined challenges of culture, context, and legal immigrant status thus can help explain why immigrant women may remain in abusive relationships for long periods of time.

Theoretical Framework: Gendered Geographies of Power and Scope for Action

To better understand why immigrant women may have serious difficulties leaving abusive partners, this analysis draws on the model of gendered geographies of power (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Based on the premise that gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales, this model is constructed around the concepts of social location, scale, and power geometry. The analytical construct of social location refers to a "person's position within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geography, kinship-based, and other stratifying factors" (Mahler & Pessar, 2001, pp. 445–446). Social locations have both spatial and power dimensions, and the power dimension affects the type and degree of agency individuals are able to wield. For example, the power individuals can wield within family relations may be significantly affected by their class embedding within the economic geography of the labor market or by their state embedding with regard to residency rights (Del Real, 2018; Ferree, 2010; Voolma, 2018).

Power relations are central to immigrants' ability to shape their lives (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003), and Mahler and Pessar's (2001) theoretical framework draws attention to how immigrant women are embedded in social structures that shape their choices and limit their agency, leaving some especially vulnerable to abuse (Mirza, 2018; Phillips, 2010). Given that women act within such constraints, their responses to abuse should not be perceived as a simple binary between (actively) leaving and (passively) staying. To the contrary, abused women spend a great amount of energy trying to limit or stop abuse (Cavanagh, 2003), and "[a]lthough exit may not be the first 'choice' women make, or ever be their choice, it must not be assumed that leaving is not women's 'preferred preference'" (Mirza, 2018, p. 45).

Data and Methods

Complementing research on domestic violence that utilizes data from majority populations, this study is based on life story interviews with a diverse sample of 35 women, all of whom immigrated to Denmark as adults and subsequently experienced spousal abuse.

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These women were selected from 75 ethnic minority women from the Global South interviewed for two research projects from 2016 to 2020.¹ The two projects included interviews with both women who had immigrated and women born in Denmark to immigrant parents.

The children of immigrants (and those who immigrated as children and were raised in Denmark) generally had better resources to leave abusive relationships, such as fluency in the local language, local networks and educational qualifications, and secure residency status (Mirza, 2018). This analysis thus was limited to women who immigrated as adults (at age 16 years or older) and whose primary cultural and educational socialization and mother tongue learning occurred outside Denmark. Consequently, they generally faced greater hardships if they experienced partner abuse. It was also relevant that the vast majority of the interviewees (34 out of 35, i.e. all except one Somali woman) were born and raised in countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia—“the patriarchal belt” (Caldwell, 1978) where societies historically have “demonstrate[ed] a consistent pattern of restriction and suppression of women” (Littrell & Bertsch, 2013, p. 310).

Recruitment and Participants

Experiencing divorce and abuse can be perceived as stigmatizing, not the least among ethnic minorities (Das, 2010; Qureshi, 2016). Consequently, the interviewees were recruited through various channels, including contact with non-governmental organizations, personal networks, snowballing, and information posted on social media sites such as Facebook. Research assistants fluent in languages such as Arabic and Somali assisted in the recruitment process. All the interviewees were informed that participation was voluntary and confidential, that they were always welcome to not answer questions or elaborate on sensitive topics, and that they could leave the interview at any time they wanted to. They were also told that they could retract their interview after its completion, an option one woman chose to exercise.

Most of the immigrant women had limited fluency in Danish, so the majority of the interviews were carried out in the women’s mother tongues, allowing them to express themselves in a language they commanded fully. The interviews were carried out in Arabic (11), Danish (10), Turkish (7), English (2), and Somali (1) and with the use of professional translators (4).²

The women came from eight countries of origin, with most identifying as Turkish (12), Iraqi (10), or having Palestinian/ Lebanese descent (7). With an age range of 25–54

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years old at the time of interview, most of the women (25) had migrated through marriage, while seven had arrived as refugees (both single and married), and three immigrated through family unification with parents or siblings. The duration of the women's stay in Denmark varied from 3 to 36 years. At the time of the interviews, all but four of the women were divorced. All the women's husbands had ethnic minority backgrounds. While some husbands had been born in Denmark or immigrated during childhood, the majority had arrived in Denmark as adults. The women's education levels varied, but the majority had had less than nine years of schooling in their youth. A minority had obtained professional qualifications in Denmark. One woman did not have children, while the remainder had one to six children.

With one exception, the women allowed the interviews to be recorded digitally. The interviews conducted in Danish or English or using translators were transcribed verbatim. Those conducted in the women's mother tongue languages were translated and transcribed into Danish or English by the interviewing research assistants who thus played a central role in the research process.

NVivo 11 software supported the analysis, which included constructing a chronology of each woman's individual life story. To protect anonymity, the women were given pseudonyms, and place names, including the names of their countries of origin, were omitted.

Life Story Interviews

The interview format of this research was inspired by Schütze's (2008) biographical interview approach, aimed at giving interviewees maximum control over the interview narrative to counteract power inequalities in interview situations. In this case, the interviewers began the interviews by introducing themselves and then asking the interviewees to tell their life stories from the beginning, paying particular attention to their family life and family conflict. This request generally sparked long narratives (which Schütze (2008) termed the "primary narrative phase") to which the interviewers listened keenly. They encouraged the interviewees to continue talking by making minimal utterances (e.g., "hmm," "I see," "And what happened next?"). The interviewers also took notes, jotting down topics they thought might merit further exploration (Hollstein, 2019). When the interviewees completed telling their life stories, interviewers went through their notes from the first interview phase and asked questions to learn more about selected aspects of the reported life story. The last, and usually very brief, interview phase departed from a list of factual questions, (such as the interviewee's year and place of birth and marriage, her educational qualifications etcetera),

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most of which had already been answered in the preceding two interview phases (Hollstein, 2019; Liversage, 2009).

This interview approach resulted in—sometimes long and winding—narratives of the women’s lives unfolding over time. The sociologist Daniel Bertaux argues that conducting such life story interviews constitutes one of the only ways of gaining information on individuals’ “situated courses of action”, as these narratives comprise both the women’s own actions and the crucially important context in which these actions took place. In fact, it was this context that often presented insurmountable obstacles for the women, blocking them from reaching their goals. Such life story narratives can thus teach us not only about what interviewees have done themselves, but “also about *what has been done to these people*, and how they reacted to it” (Bertaux, 2003, p. 40, emphasis in the original).

Analytical Focus on Dramatized Speech

The analysis used two textual tools developed by Goffman (1986, p. 520). First was a distinction between the “teller” (the woman telling her life story during the research interview) and the “protagonist” (the teller’s younger self textually constructed in the interview narrative). The second was to pay attention to the occurrences of “dramatized speech” (Chase, 1995; Goffman, 1986) in which the teller dramatized the words, thoughts, or deeds of the protagonist in interactions with significant others. Such dramatized speech constituted dense narrative passages as the story-time (the duration of events described) and the text-time (the duration of the telling) approached one another (Rimmon-Kenan, 2001, p. 46).

The passages of dramatized speech were often constructed as a “replaying” of central interactional situations for the listening interviewer. Thus the argument of a specific afternoon might be narrated in considerable dramatized detail over a sizable amount of time during the interview while the next five years of married life then might be condensed in a single sentence. When dramatizing specific past incidents, the tellers thus narratively constructed certain events as critical for their unfolding life stories. The remainder of this article demonstrates how such passages of dramatized speech can yield insights into how the immigrant women’s embedding in particular gendered geographies of power could circumscribe their ability to effect positive change in their lives when exposed to intimate partner violence.

Results

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Early Marriage to Relative Strangers

All 35 women had been abused by their husbands, making their entry into their ill-fated marriages relevant to understand their subsequent suffering. Although some women—especially the better educated ones—married well into their twenties and to men of their own choosing, most interviewees did not. In line with general patterns in their countries of origin, most women married at young ages to men they hardly knew (Littrell & Bertsch, 2013). Jamilla—a 38-year-old women—explained her marriage at age 17 years to a husband living in Denmark:

It was my own fault. My father didn't force me. He said: "Someone wants to marry you. Will you?" [I said:] "Oh, okay." But I think my father made a mistake. He should have told me: "You are too young. You are still in school. You should finish your education." Because you shouldn't marry as a teenager but become 18 or 20 or even a bit older. Then a woman is wiser For me, I just thought about going on a plane and getting a white wedding dress. I had no idea what awaited me. (Jamila, age 38)

Dramatizing a pivotal point in her life, the teller (the grown Jamilla at the time of the interview) evoked the way she felt that her girlish "okay" to her father's question given in her late teens turned her later marital hardships into her "own fault." In terms of the gendered geographies of power, the father, from one perspective, granted the 17-year-old protagonist a degree of self-determination within the kinship hierarchy. However, framed by the broader structures of gender and economy, the interchange occurred in a context that severely limited the young woman's agency. Within this context, women were expected to become wives and mothers rather than to get an education—a possible way of achieving both economic independence and greater self-determination. The older teller wished that instead of giving her the choice of any man at a young age, her father had protected her and insisted that she stay in school. Had her father uttered the wished-for protective words against early marriage at that pivotal point in the past, Jamilla's subsequent life trajectory well might have followed a different, less abusive course.

Living in Abusive Marriages

All 35 interviewees suffered spousal abuse in Denmark. While the onset, frequency, and severity of the abuse varied, several interviewees related experiencing substantial violence immediately after their weddings. Ilisa (married at age 18 to a much older husband, whom she joined in Denmark) related her start to married life:

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The first week he hit me. Really hard. We lived in a small flat, and I was cleaning when I came across an envelope with a lot of pictures—disgusting and vulgar pictures of nude women. I got both upset and angry. When he got home, I confronted him with the pictures and asked him what it was. He tore the envelope out of my hand and said, “Why did you take those pictures? This is none of your business.” I said: “Fine—if it is not my business, then don’t leave such pictures in my home,” and I snatched the pictures back and tore them to pieces. And then he got really angry and started giving me a full beating. After that, I just kept my mouth shut. I was afraid he would get angry and beat me again. (Ilisa, age 49)

This statement shows an interactional process in which a young wife became angry and upset at discovering her husband’s former association with other women. In this situation, her husband could have responded in a variety of ways. In this case, he berated her, and the incident quickly escalated as he resorted to violence. Older, taller, and stronger, he applied his greater physical strength to assert dominance. In the gendered geographies of power of intimate relationships, the biological fact of most men’s larger size and muscle mass is indeed central to understanding patterns of heterosexual spousal abuse: if a conflict becomes physical, the man almost always has the upper hand.

In Ilisa’s case, her initial resistance to her husband’s conduct led to her suffering a “full beating” and subsequently acting subserviently for fear of its recurrence. Indeed, “[c]reating fear is one way in which power is generated through bodily violations Fear of violence thus both limits women’s lives and is part of their subordination” (Enander, 2008, p. 18). Experiences and fear of violence may severely limit women’s ability to act in abusive relationships (Erez et al., 2009). Having once challenged her husband and suffered the consequences, Ilisa “kept [her] mouth shut” for years, even as he began blatantly showing his infidelity.

While Ilisa did not seek help, other women who experienced abuse and hardship early in their marriages turned to for support from their parents. With strong norms against divorce in the countries of origin, however, the women did not receive the support they sought. In some cases, the parents outright forbade that daughters to divorce. Zaima stated that when she asked for support to leave her husband, her father said: “In our family, we do not have any divorced women, and we are not going to get any.” In other cases, support for divorce required women to give up their children. Yara described her experience:

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I thought about divorcing already when we just had one child. But my father said: “If you have to get a divorce, then get a divorce. But I am not going to help raise somebody else’s child. You are still young and can remarry. But I want you alone without your kid.” And I could not live with that, so I told myself that this is my destiny. I have to accept it. (Yara, age 37)

Yara’s example shows that some women considered divorce even though it meant that they would have to return to their country of origin. Living independently as single mothers was not an option there, so their ability to leave their husbands depended on gaining parental support, which could be conditional. Yara’s example well illustrates the interplay between national, economic, and familial geographies of power, which may severely restrict immigrant women’s scope for action and force them to remain in abusive marriages.

The Importance of Legal Immigration Status

When one spouse depends on the other to retain a visa, it creates a power asymmetry, which may allow spousal ties to turn “toxic” (Del Real, 2018, p. 548). The ability of one spouse to have the other expelled in the case of divorce is itself a poignant demonstration of the links between the gendered hierarchies of power on different scales, which can effectively undermine the less powerful spouse’s ability to exert agency (Charsley & Liversage, 2015; Liversage, 2013a).

One example of such asymmetrical situations comes from Rubya who at age 23, two years before the interview, came to Denmark for an arranged marriage to a man who belonged to an ethnic minority and had been born and raised in Denmark. Rubya and her husband did not get along, leading to the following situation:

[My husband] always used to threaten and scare me that he was a Danish passport-holder. He would say that: “Your visa will be taken.” “You just wait till your ‘visa-time’ is over, then I will show you.” Even when I was nine months pregnant, the whole family threatened me that they would take the [Danish residency] card from me. And even my own family did not support me. They would say: “Who will take care of you? No one will marry you with a kid.” (Rubya, age 25)

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The dramatized speech in this interview contains the voices of Rubya's husband, in-laws, and parents, who all told the protagonist that she had no way out of her marriage. We do not hear Rubya's own voice answering—perhaps because she could say little in reply.

Rubya stated that after she gave birth, her husband threatened her to have her deported and told her that “he can get the custody, and his mother and sister would take care of” the baby. Rubya was understandably at her wits' end because of the prospect of being deported without her child—a predicament that some immigrant women have suffered (Anitha, 2011; Ghafournia & Easteal, 2019). Although likely not possible in Rubya's case (her child was a Danish citizen because the father had a Danish passport), the threat nevertheless fulfilled its purpose of effecting her subordination. Interviewed in a women's shelter where she had recently sought aid after being hit by both her husband and her in-laws, Rubya had decided to return to her husband for fear of being separated from her child. Similarly, other women spoke of their husbands' threats of deportation and their relief if they secured an independent means to remain in Denmark.

When wives did gain stronger legal status in Denmark, the balance of power could shift, but such shifts could also engender violence, as experienced by Dalal. Some years after getting a permanent residency permit, Dalal applied for and gained Danish citizenship, which her husband did not want. She told that upon returning from picking up her new citizenship papers, the following happened:

[My husband and I] sat in the car, and he was quiet and in a bad mood. So to break the silence, I said: “Well, darling, where should we go to celebrate that I have become a Dane?” He immediately pulled the car to the curb and began beating me. He kept on and on, saying: “Don't you believe that you are something now, just because you got a Danish citizenship. I don't give a s*** for that piece of paper. It doesn't change my ability to smash you up right here in the middle of the street, without nobody being able to do anything to me. Don't think you have become something now.” I just said it as a joke, but he went ballistic. (Dalal, age 49)

Dalal's new citizenship, which linked her firmly to the Danish state, drew the ire of her husband. Violence can serve as both an assertion of power and an attempt to reassert it (Hearn et al., 2016), so this incident can be interpreted to show that Dalal's husband felt that his wife's new status threatened his position of dominance. Consequently, in the intimate space of their marriage, he physically demonstrated to Dalal that she remained at his mercy.

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As different interwoven dynamics worked together to keep immigrant women from leaving their marriages, the majority of the 35 women remained with their husbands for years and decades despite suffering considerable hardship. Many bowed to their husbands' dominance in situations like one that Samira described:

[My husband] could control everything: how I dressed, what I could and could not wear, who I could talk with or should stay away from, where I could and could not go. He would set a time when I had to be home—just as if I was a small child. He liked me to be like a robot, which he could make do anything. If he said “Jump!” I jumped. If he said, “Go to the right,” I went right. (Samira, age 48)

Samira patiently remaining in a difficult marriage for years is indeed a response commonly observed among both immigrant women (Qureshi, 2013, 2016; Zafar, 2015) and women in the interviewees' countries of origin (Zakar et al., 2012).

Challenges Getting Help from the Danish Authorities

All but four of the 35 interviewed women were divorced at the time of the interviews, so most of their marriages had ended. The paths of their marriages were long and winding, and so, too, were most of their divorces. While weakly positioned against their husbands, the women nevertheless lived in a Scandinavian state ranked high on international gender equality indexes (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). In Denmark, most women hold paid employment, a well-developed welfare system makes it possible for single mothers to make ends meet, and social services are supposed to aid abused women

Nevertheless, a number of the interviewees told of inadequate responses from frontline workers such as police officers and social workers, even when such frontline workers entered the dysfunctional private space of the women's homes. In the case of Warda, a refugee who had recently arrived in Denmark, her husband wanted a divorce, and he began beating her to make her leave the household. Better educated than most interviewees, Warda contacted the social authorities for help:

Two social workers came to our home to intervene. [To my husband] they said—sort of indirectly: “You shouldn't beat your wife.” He answered: “I never beat my wife. I am a good husband.” But it was summer, and I was wearing shorts, and they could see all the bruises I had all over my body. Regardless of this, they didn't help me. They did nothing. (Warda, age 38)

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The social authorities also erroneously told Warda that she would have to leave Denmark if her husband divorced her. She could not bear this prospect, so shortly after the social workers' visit, Warda tried to commit suicide.

Faten too told of reaching out for but not getting desperately needed help. She made her first call for help when she fled the family home after a severe beating. Barefoot, she barged into a pizzeria, crying for help. The police arrived and went home with Faten. Using one of the couple's daughters as a translator, they interrogated both her and her husband.

Faten told the following:

I showed my feet [which were discolored due to severe beatings on the soles] to the female officer saying: "Look, what he has done to me." She told me to call the hospital to get an appointment for an examination. I said: "How can I do that? I have no telephone. I wouldn't know how to get there." But she just repeated that I should go there on my own, so I never went. (Faten, age 52)

Isolated in the family home for years, Faten did not have the skills to go to the hospital herself, and the police did not extend her any help. The only action they took against her husband was to admonish him not to be abusive again. In response, his next step was to move the family conflict away from potential interference by the Danish state. Shortly after this incident, he abducted the family's children to his country of origin (Liversage, forthcoming 2021; Anitha et al., 2018). These events illustrate the hardships abused immigrant women may suffer if they are not extended timely support.

Women Ending Marriages

As is often the case, most of the 35 women made several attempts to leave their husbands before they finally succeeded (Erez et al., 2009; Ghafournia & Easteal, 2019; Yingling et al., 2015). Wafa followed a winding path out of her marriage:

I tried to leave [her husband] three times, but then I went back. [A women's NGO] was the only place where I knew how to seek help. I went there and told them: "Listen, I don't have anybody to turn to, and I need help." I said: "It is only a matter of time before my husband beats me and kills me." They helped me to go to a crisis center, but my family and his family and our common friends interfered. They told me that they would help me, and he would change, and he had learned from his mistakes,

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so I ended up returning to him. But a couple of months later, everything just got even worse. (Wafa, age 41)

Wafa's path wound between seeking available Danish support measures and returning to her husband due to pressure from within her own network. Wafa finally left her husband for good when her son overheard his father planning to use trickery or force to take her and the children to their country of origin. Similarly, in line with general research on intimate partner violence, several other interviewees spoke of leaving their husbands only when they realized how severe the danger to the safety and wellbeing of themselves or their children had become (Enander, 2008).

Such a realization occurred to Esma, who had lived with an abusive, unfaithful husband for years. When almost an adult, her firstborn was hospitalized with a psychiatric condition Esma attributed to his dysfunctional home environment. Growing up witnessing and/or experiencing abuse can be very harmful for children (Carlson et al., 2019). Esma decided that her son should not return from hospital to witness any more violence, so while her husband was out, she had a locksmith change the locks and give her the new keys. When her husband returned, she told him that their marriage was over, leading to the following exchange:

He said: "I will kill you." And I answered: "I have one life, and if God decides that I shall die now at your hand, so be it. I am not scared of you." And then he said no more. He just accepted it. He thought I would be scared of him as I had been in the past, but I said, "I cannot be scared anymore because I have lost everything." (Esma, age 42)

While beatings could install fear in a young wife, this older woman had apparently grown so accustomed to abuse that she was no longer scared of it—or even of losing her life. This stance supported her actions. Some abused women's feeling that their lives had little value was also reflected in the sizeable minority of interviewees who, like Warda, spoke of considering or attempting suicide (see also Hayes, 2013; Hurwitz et al., 2006).

In a number of cases, the women's success in leaving bad marriages could be tied to timely support from frontline workers. For women positioned between workers who wanted them to leave abuse and family members who wanted their marriages to remain intact, the

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right intervention could make all the difference. After several stays at women's shelters Maisja told of the following interchange that made her leave her husband for good:

I take my children and go to the shelter Then [my husband] and my mother-in-law but also his brother started calling saying: "Come back. We will give you money, gold and this and that." They said: "Come on, it is not funny. He promises he won't hit you," and stuff like that. At first, I thought I would return to him, but then a man from the shelter gave me a sentence to keep in my mind. When I told him that I was going back home, he said: "If a man promises something once, he promises several times. And if he slaps you once, he slaps you several times." I gave that some thought: Either a man lets you be, or he doesn't The next morning, I called [my husband] and said I wanted a divorce. (Maisja, age 32)

Realizing that the abuse would not end until she left her marriage, Maisja applied for divorce. However, for many women divorce did not come easily, and Maisja, in particular, suffered extended post-separation violence (Stark & Hester, 2019). Such hardships included stalking and violence by ex-husbands and stigmatization from ethnic communities and families (Chaudhuri et al., 2014; Rai & Choi, 2018). Ruwayda suffered high strain after her divorce:

Many women say to me: "Eh, Ruwayda, after seeing the hard life you have, then we don't want a divorce." So they keep quiet [in their marriages] because they can get a hell of a life if they divorce. And they can also be let down by the authorities and the social services. (Ruwayda, age 41)

Other women, especially those with better socioeconomic resources, were able to leave abusive husbands and subsequently forge fulfilling lives for themselves. Selda, an educated professional and a recent divorcee, attributed her newfound freedom to a national context that she felt supported women's independence:

From [the Danes], I have learned the word "no." I come from a society where you really are not allowed to say "no," but I have learned to say, "Stop! That is enough!"... I have learned to love myself and do what I want myself. (Selda, age 33)

Selda told how living in Denmark made her more assertive. Women's generally stronger position in her new national context directly affected her interactions with her surroundings. In Denmark, she began saying "no" to her husband rather than patiently accepting her lot.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study builds on life story interviews with 35 women, of whom almost all were raised in “patriarchal belt” countries, all had immigrated to Denmark as adults, and all suffered abuse by their husbands. These interviews were mostly conducted in the women’s mother tongue languages, a methodological approach that enabled the women, whose voices are often overheard, to express themselves with eloquence and detail about their own lives. The study contributes to our understanding of the cumulative impacts of immigrant women’s multiple experiences of victimization, which has hitherto received insufficient research attention (Gonçalves & Matos, 2016, p. 707).

Drawing on Mahler and Pessar’s (2001) model of gendered geographies of power, the analysis follows women’s situated courses of action (Bertaux, 2003) into, through, and out of their ill-fated marriages. The analysis emphasizes that exercising agency takes time. Leaving abusive partners, therefore, should be conceptualized not as a single event but as a gradual, often non-linear process (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Hayes, 2013).

Positions in social space have both spatial and power dimensions. Accordingly, the analysis shows that some women sought to leave the private space they shared with their husbands early in their marriages, but dependent on support and turned down when soliciting support, they long found their path away from the home blocked. The interviewed women’s difficulties acting on their own accord were tied to their economic and social dependence on men (husbands or fathers) in their countries of origin and to their status as immigrant outsiders (often with limited Danish language skills) in their country of residence. This status as immigrant outsiders strengthened both their dependence on co-ethnic networks in which strong norms against divorce persisted and their fear of losing their visas in the case of divorce (Adams & Campbell, 2012; Del Real, 2018; McWilliams et al., 2015).

Individual access to residency permits can indeed be conceptualized as empowering women in the hierarchies of power on the scale of the nation-state. The importance of the visa also became visible in the stronger position held by the interviewees whose visa status was not tied to their marriages. Such women generally had better options to voice dissatisfaction, including early in marriage, because they did not have to fear being expelled from Denmark in the case of divorce (see also Mirza, 2018).

Access to independent residency permits and citizenship depends partially on the ways in which individual lifetime intersects with political developments unfolding in historical time. In a troubling observation, legal changes in Denmark over the past two decades have

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made it increasingly difficult for immigrant women to leave abusive relationships, as it has become still harder to obtain independent residency permits. The current probationary period (the length of stay necessary to qualify for an independent visa) in Denmark is thus eight years, and applicants must also meet a number of criteria, including speaking Danish at a specific level and having had full time work for a specified length of time – criteria which a controlling husband may well be able to keep his wife from fulfilling (Nyidanmark, 2020). While women who can document domestic abuse may also be able to obtain visas, the difficulties and insecurities related to exercising this option may prevent abused women from acting due to fear of deportation (Liversage, 2012a; 2013a). Such rules may thus contribute to immigrant women remaining in marriages with abusive husbands.

The analysis shows that when the interviewed women narrated their life stories, they often used dramatized speech to highlight various “fateful moments” (Giddens, 1991, p. 112). When doing this, the women “replayed” specific incidents where they had tried to solicit help, for example, from their fathers and frontline workers, had attempted to make their husbands mend their ways, or had been forced to keep quiet even when exposed to denigration and abuse. In these narratives the women thus brought to life the grave challenges they had faced.

Their many aborted attempts to exert agency stress that immigrant women are not innately passive victims, complying with patriarchal constraints (Kapur, 2002; Chaudhuri et al., 2014). Instead, their disempowered embedding in social structures limits their agency. Indeed, “[t]he more marginalized a woman is, the less likely she is to employ overt acts of resistance” (Mirza, 2018, p. 54). This analysis thus offers insights into the inseparability of gendered geographies of power operating on both small and large scales, and demonstrates how supportive and unsupportive interactions at various important junctures may contribute to shaping immigrant women’s lives.

Limitations

Interviewees’ present-day positions are central to how they narratively constructed their life stories, so the divorced status of most interviewees limits the breath of the findings. Including the narratives of more still-married immigrant women likely would have allowed for more emphasis on the merits of keeping marriages intact. In addition, the cross-national character of the empirical material is a limitation because some issues are tied to specific countries of origin. For example, women from countries where family legislation is Islamic,

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such as Lebanon and Iraq, may face greater challenges dissolving their marriages from a religious perspective than women from countries where family legislation is secular, such as Turkey (Petersen, 2020; Liversage, 2012b). A narrower focus by country of origin could enable in-depth explorations of such country-specific topics.

Implications for Practice

This study shows that immigrant women, especially those with fewer socioeconomic resources, may experience pressure from both families and ethnic minority communities to remain in abusive marriages (Akpinar, 2003; Liversage, 2013b; 2019; Qureshi, 2016). Lacking network and family support, their ability to leave abusive marriages may be highly dependent on aid from frontline workers, who may not understand the women's predicaments well enough. Thus, an implication for practice is to ensure more informed responses by frontline workers and greater attention to providing interventions tailored to women's needs (Eliassi, 2015; Kiamanesh & Hauge, 2019).

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End Notes

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² The author carried out some of the Danish, English, and translator-mediated interviews, as well as all the interviews conducted in Turkish. Research assistants with different language competences conducted the other interviews.