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'For the sake of my daughter and the new generation': investigating a peer-to-peer approach to supporting migrant women exposed to partner abuse

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ABSTRACT

Migrant women exposed to interpersonal violence often face barriers to accessing essential support, and can be hard-to-reach for support services. One way to bridge the gap between vulnerable persons and support provisions is the peer-to-peer approach. This article explores how such support can be provided in an ethnic minority context by analysing interviews with volunteers in the all-female NGO 'Sister Supporters'. The analysis is structured around the nine-phase 'Sarah Waller' help-seeking model, showing how the shared backgrounds between the volunteers and the women they support facilitate trust-building. Their shared backgrounds include diverse cultural and linguistic competencies and the volunteers commonly being abuse survivors themselves. In the early cognitive phases of the help-seeking process, volunteer outreach provides vulnerable women with information and emotional support. In later help-seeking phases, users of Sister Supporters take overt action to leave their abuser. In these phases, NGO volunteers often pass cases on to NGO staff members, who engage in advocacy activities and bridge-building to support providers within the mainstream public service system. When reaching the final ninth 'restoration phase' of the help-seeking process, some users of Sister Supporters decide to become volunteers themselves. As the NGO's work challenges established gender hierarchies in some ethnic minority contexts, volunteers must circumnavigate considerable resistance from conservative co-ethnic forces. However, the NGO provides a community that supports the volunteers in dealing with such resistance. Sister Supporters' peer-to-peer approach constitutes a novel and promising approach to doing social work with vulnerable women in ethnic minority contexts.

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Introduction

While all women can face interpersonal violence (IPV), various factors can make migrant women particularly vulnerable to such abuse. In a context of Global-South-to-Global-North migration, research documents how becoming a migrant can increase vulnerability in multiple ways. Migration often severs supportive personal networks and makes communication in a new language challenging (Ghafournia and Eastaerl 2018; Kiamanesh and Hauge 2019). Migration can also increase vulnerability when marriage migrants depend on their partners for residency (Innes et al. 2024; Segrave 2021). When migrant wives lack

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adequate knowledge of their rights in their new context (Vasil 2023; Voolma 2018), it enables husbands to exploit their position of power (Campbell and Mannell 2016). Social isolation is a core element in IPV. As an ongoing process, social isolation can effectively prevent vulnerable women from identifying anyone who can help them (Schucan Bird, Stokes, and Rivas 2025; Vasil 2023). Additionally, socio-cultural norms that normalize abuse and stigmatize women who leave their husbands can increase isolation and make it difficult for abused migrant women to access support (Ahmad et al. 2009; Green, Satyen, and Toumbourou 2024).

Furthermore, in host countries, both inadequate understanding of migrant women's problems in welfare support systems (Buzungu and Rugkasa 2023; Kiamanesh and Hauge 2019; Olsson and Bergman 2022), institutional racism (Eliassi 2017; Hulley et al. 2023) and some women's fear of losing custody of children (Johansen 2022; Rabo, Estrada Tun, and Jorum 2021) can erode trust in service providers (Green, Satyen, and Toumbourou 2024). Consequently, migrant women suffering abuse may have poorer help-seeking options compared to women from the majority. This situation calls for alternative ways of doing social work with migrant women exposed to interpersonal violence. Consequently, recent studies have called for an exploration of how to develop culturally appropriate interventions for such social work (Sultana et al. 2023). Hulley et al. (2023, 1011) specifically calls for strengthening areas such as peer support for ethnic minority women, as they are commonly caught between personal relationships they cannot rely on and mainstream services that do not always cater well to their needs. The present article heeds such calls by investigating a culturally appropriate peer-to-peer approach to providing support for ethnic minority women experiencing abuse.

In a peer-to-peer approach, support is provided by individuals who – rather than being mainstream professionals – share important features with users (Gregory et al. 2022; Shalaby and Agyapong 2020). The approach seems well-suited for ethnic minorities, who are more likely to use informal rather than formal channels of support (Schucan Bird, Stokes, and Rivas 2025). To improve our understanding of this type of support for ethnic minority women experiencing IPV, the present article investigates a Danish NGO, here called 'Sister Supporters' (pseudonym). The all-woman NGO consists of a small professional core and approximately 80 volunteers, predominantly with an ethnic minority background. Sister Supporters provides information and outreach support as well as advocacy to ethnic minority women experiencing IPV.

Research shows that when women leave abusive partners, it should be perceived as a process, rather than as a discreet event (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009). One approach to understanding the leaving-process for minoritized women is utilizing the 'Sarah Waller's Help-Seeking Model' (Waller et al. 2023). Based on an interview study with black American victim-survivors, and constructed from the perspective of such women themselves, this model brings out the complexities of the help-seeking process. The model consists of nine phases, divided into four *cognitive* and five *behavioural* phases. The cognitive phases move from 1) 'awareness' through 2) 'acknowledgement' and 3) 'assessment' to 4) 'enough', which constitutes the precursor to action. The behavioural phases proceed from 5) 'enlist' (supportive resources) to 6) 'escalate' (vis-à-vis the abusive partner). Often, the next phase is 7) 'reject' (where relevant help seems out of reach) before reaching 8) 'resolve'. In the final phase 9) 'restoration', women have fully left their abusive relationships, and are rebuilding their lives. Taking a processual approach informed by Sarah Waller's Help-Seeking Model, this article poses the following research question:

How can a peer-to-peer NGO approach contribute to bridging the gap that commonly separates migrant women exposed to IPV from adequate help and support at various phases of the nine-phase help-seeking process?

The next section discusses literature on how peer-to-peer approaches can be well-suited to establishing the trust that is pivotal when extending help to vulnerable individuals. The article then

elaborates on data and methods before proceeding to the phase-based empirical analysis and concluding on the findings.

Peer-to-peer support – creating trust and engendering recognition

The central mechanism in peer-to-peer support is related to shared identity. While we all have multiple identities (Jenkins 2008), in relation to peer-support, the foregrounded identity is commonly one of experiences with particular types of hardships. A substantial share of research on peer-to-peer support comes from a mental health context (Kessing 2022; Shalaby and Agyapong 2020; Watson 2019). While less well researched, peer-to-peer provisions also exist elsewhere in relation to, for example, substance abuse, suicidal behaviour or different types of victimization (Cross 2019; Mendoza et al. 2016; Schlichthorst et al. 2020).

When it comes to vulnerable ethnic minority populations (both migrants and their offspring raised in the host country), research shows that peer-to-peer support can be a promising approach (Guevara et al. 2024; Ho et al. 2022; Hulley et al. 2023; Marchi et al. 2024). Such support can establish supportive relationships with otherwise hard-to-reach populations (Prosman, Wong, and Lagro-Janssen 2014). These approaches include peer-led support groups for women who have left abusive relationships (Mendez et al. 2023; Tutty et al. 2017) and one-on-one peer support and/or advocacy support helping vulnerable individuals negotiate both the mainstream support system and a variety of other challenges (Bloom 2023; Prosman, Wong, and Lagro-Janssen 2014; Rivas et al. 2019). These types of community-based (rather than systems-based) support seem particularly well suited to improving the situation of abused ethnic minority women, helping them leave abusive relationships (De Prince et al. 2012).

Peer-to-peer support can complement traditional approaches to treatment and support as the shared identity between peer workers and users can engender feelings of hope and recognition (de Ven, Leferink, and Pemberton 2023; Lalayants et al. 2015). Shared identity can also increase levels of trust (De Prince et al. 2012; Khelaifat 2018). Regarding trust, the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel famously pointed out that trust is a *'hypothesis for future behavior'* (Simmel [1908] 1950 [1908], p.315). As the future is always unknowable, trust also involves a leap of faith, an act which is premised on accepting a level of risk and vulnerability (Frederiksen 2014). Fear of the future, including pressing safety concerns during often complex and protracted leaving processes, can make women lose heart and return to the men they have tried to leave (Ahmad et al. 2009; Bruton and Tyson 2018). While abuse experiences are often kept from public view, sharing such life experiences can contribute to creating trusting relationships between peer-to-peer volunteers and women in need of support, also in an ethnic minority context (Rivas et al. 2019, 3). Before coming to the analysis of the Sister Supporters' peer-to-peer approach, the next section presents the methods and data.

Methods and data

The context for the study is the NGO Sister Supporters. Founded in 2020 in one of Denmark's larger cities, the NGO consists of three salaried employees and around 80 volunteers. Aged between 18 and 65, volunteers include both immigrants who arrived in Denmark as adults, and individuals raised in Denmark in migrant families. Most volunteers have personal experiences with unwanted control and/or abuse in their natal families, marital relationships or both. While many of the volunteers originate from Arabic-speaking countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, other countries of origin include Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Pakistan. A few volunteers have Danish majority backgrounds. The NGO receives state, municipal and private funding.

I gathered data between 2021 and 2024, making observations and doing interviews within the NGO to follow its growth and consolidation. I observed numerous NGO activities, including debate events, conferences, and multi-day training activities for new volunteers. The observations enabled

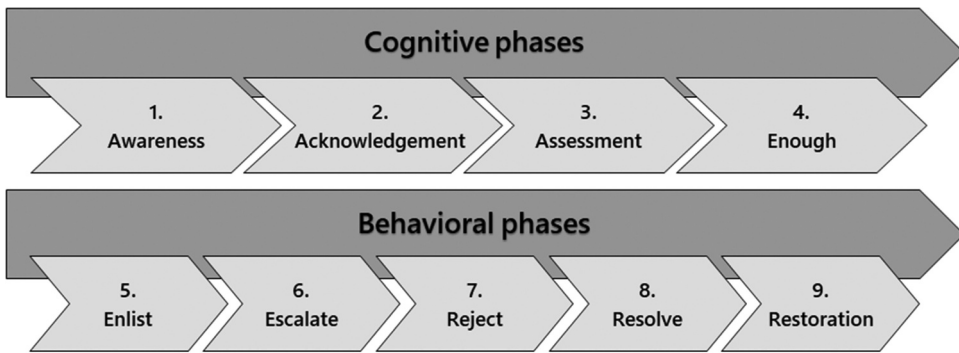


Figure 1. Sarah Waller's help-seeking model.

me to gain volunteer trust and to better understand the NGO's approach. This article is based on data from interviews with volunteers and salaried staff. I interviewed all salaried staff, four members in total (alone and together – some several times). I interviewed 15 volunteers with various ethnic minority backgrounds, 13 of whom turned out to have personal experiences with exposure to coercive control (Stark 2007) and/or different types of abuse. Interviewees were aged between 27 and 63 years (mean: 43 years). Some women were born in Denmark or arrived during childhood, while others had migrated as adults. Interviewees' professional backgrounds spanned from no educational credentials over medium-level professions such as social worker, dental assistant or office clerk to university graduates. Interviews, which mostly lasted 45–90 minutes, were conducted either in people's home, in the NGO office space, or online. In total, I conducted 24 interviews with 19 individuals.

The staff member interviews followed a semi-structured approach, focusing on the NGO's activities, the challenges it faced and how such challenges were handled. Interviews with volunteers combined a semi-structured approach focusing on volunteer activities with a biographical approach (Hollstein 2019). During the biographical part of the interview, I asked all volunteers to tell me about their life experiences, including any abuse experiences they were comfortable sharing, and to tell how their personal engagement with Sister Supporters had started. In this part of the interviews, questions were kept to a minimum, enabling the women to construct their own biographical narratives (Bertaux 2003).

After uploading interview transcripts to an NVivo 14 database, I took an abductive approach to the analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Hence, I went back and forth between the empirical material and different theoretical approaches, paying particular attention to narratives of interaction between volunteers and vulnerable ethnic minority women. In this process, the ways in which volunteers both engaged in, and developed, the peer-to-peer approach stood out as particularly important. It also became clear that volunteers were dependent on the challenging, but vital, issue of how to ensure that vulnerable women could get adequate help from the mainstream welfare system, if they left their husbands. These observations made me engaged with literature on peer-support and on advocacy, as I developed the present analysis in a number of steps. I use Sarah Waller's help-seeking model to structure the analysis of the NGO's way of working. Throughout the process, creating and safeguarding trust emerged as central, cross-cutting themes. Figure 1 provides a schematical overview of the nine phases of Sarah Waller's help-seeking model (four cognitive phases and five behavioural phases) as women progress from an initial awareness of suffering abuse, to a final restoration phase.

This research follows the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and institutional guidelines at [name removed]. Regarding informed consent, care was taken to explain the research process to informants, who were informed they could retract their interview at any time. After securing permission, interviews were recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To

ensure confidentiality, all informants have pseudonyms. Geographical information, including country of origin, has been omitted, and details regarding, for example, profession or number of children may have been changed.

Results

Below I discuss Sister Supporters' approach to providing support. The NGO carries out two main types of activities. One type are broader information-related activities, centring on topics such as bodily integrity and individual rights. This includes volunteers giving presentations in educational institutions and engaging in social media campaigns. Another type are various forms of direct support to ethnic minority women enduring controlling behaviour and abuse. The two types of activities are related, for example, when social media campaigns raise awareness about where abused ethnic minority women can find support and prompt such women to contact the NGO. In this analysis, I focus solely on the second type of activities – direct help to women in need. This includes activities to establish rapport with isolated women, direct peer-to-peer support and support in bridging to mainstream Danish service providers.

I begin with Sister Supporters' volunteer outreach activities and initial contact with users. These activities correlate with the early cognitive phases of the nine-phase help-seeking model (Waller et al. 2023, see Figure 1), as individual users become increasingly aware that the abuse they experience is unacceptable. I then proceed by analysing the Sister Supporters approach through the model's phases.

The cognitive phases – raising awareness and increasing acknowledgement

Information about the NGO was not only disseminated through educational activities and social media campaigns, volunteers also told people in their personal networks that they could help ethnic minority women experiencing abuse. In some cases, such information-sharing happened in the workplace, where volunteers could establish connections to isolated women whose husbands kept them from socializing. Such forced isolation is a well-documented strategy in abusive relationships (Schucan Bird, Stokes, and Rivas 2025; Vasil 2023). For example, Sonia, a Sister Supporters volunteer working in a kindergarten, described how she regularly mentioned her engagement in the NGO to immigrant mothers, some of whom subsequently approached her with inquiries and needs for help. Another volunteer, Parvin, who worked in a beauty clinic with predominantly non-Danish customers, shared the following about her approach:

Usually I just start with doing my [beautician] thing. After I while, I might say: *'Where are you from?'* and then slowly-slowly: *'Do you have children? How many? Are you married? . . . Are you happy?'* Often, when I ask: *'Are you happy with your life?'* – that's when it comes. Then we take it nice and easy. I say: *'You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. If you want to, you can talk and I will listen. And I will forget everything as soon as you go out that door.'* Once, a woman stood up, crying, and couldn't go on with her treatment. Even though we hadn't started talking about anything at all. That's how deep it was within her . . . I give them my telephone number and say: *'Just call. Don't worry about the time. If you feel a need to talk, you just call.'* (Parvin)

Parvin's account underscores the importance of time in the early cognitive phase; she breaches the topic of problems in personal life slowly and enables women to get back to her later, by telephone if necessary. In relationship building, this time element is essential for developing trust (Rivas et al. 2019). With not only their different social circles and lines of work, but also their combined command of several non-European languages, the volunteers can reach a large number of ethnic minority women who might benefit from Sister Supporters' help.

The challenge of reaching isolated women to supply them with essential knowledge about their rights and the support options available in Denmark is illustrated in the following experiences of another volunteer:

My sister lives in [town elsewhere in Denmark]. And there are some women who are not doing well. They remain with their husbands because they have children. It's that spiral of violence¹ that's hard to break. One of the women has no family at all in Denmark. She lives in the same building as my sister – on a different floor. When we are to talk on the phone, I call my sister. She goes down to the woman and makes sure that her husband is not there. Then she hands her the phone and goes to the bottom floor to keep watch, in case her husband returns home. (Tasleem)

The isolated family migrant described here had been in an abusive relationship for over a decade. At the time of the quoted volunteer interview, the abused woman still was not ready to proceed from the cognitive phases and take overt actions to leave her husband. However, through a number of mother tongue telephone conversations with Tasleem, the woman was acknowledging (phase 2) and assessing (phase 3) her difficult life situation, and learning about her options. The woman was also building a trusting relationship to a supportive individual, who could aid her if she later reached phase 4 ('enough') and decided to act. Until then, however, it was paramount for the woman's safety that she avoided arousing her husband's suspicion (Sullivan and Goodman 2019), pointing to both the difficult and contested terrain the NGO volunteers have to negotiate and to the urgent need for developing interventions suitable for meeting the needs of such hard-to-reach populations (Rivas et al. 2019; Sultana et al. 2023).

The complexities of providing support when abused women turn to action

Part of the volunteer training covered how to engage with users that decide to proceed from the cognitive to the behavioural phases. Such engagement was to help the women through the phases 'enlist' (phase 5) and 'escalate' (phase 6) of Sarah Waller's help-seeking model. These phases include various types of help-seeking from authorities such as the police. To counteract complications due to the commonly observed pattern whereby women suffering abuse leave their partners only to return to them again (Ahmad et al. 2009; Bruton and Tyson 2018), Sister Supporters volunteers were taught the importance of ensuring that it was users themselves who sought help from the authorities, rather than volunteers becoming too involved in this part of the process. As the volunteer Mizna explained, help-seeking women could lose heart during the process:

Rana [a staff member] always tells us that we have to take care of ourselves. Suddenly [the women seeking help] can return to their relationship again. Suddenly, the man is sugary sweet and the one and only. And then it's like: *'Who helped you?; Mizna did' ...* Then it can become dangerous. So, we have to be careful.

The trusting relationship between volunteers and users can be compromised if users suddenly '*throw the organization under the bus*' (Rana, staff member), blaming the NGO for having misled them. Volunteers had to consciously work to avoid such unwanted developments. In this regard, the volunteer Silaah explains how she took care in her contact with a woman who had experienced severe marital abuse:

She contacted me when she found out that I was a volunteer in Sister Supporters. She asked if I could help her get away ... I said: *'I can help you and guide you, but you yourself have to turn to your case worker and to the police'*. But she didn't want to do that. I can tell her about the law and about the system, but she has to leave herself. If I have to stand next to her [when she leaves], it can ruin both my life, my reputation and our work. She can suddenly say that *'I was forcing her'*.

Silaah exemplifies both the importance of negotiating boundaries in peer-to-peer support (Mendoza et al. 2016) and the fact that volunteers, too, have to place a measure of trust with their users. As trust is '*a gamble, and a risky investment*' (Luhman 1979, 24), volunteers had to insist that the vulnerable women actively drove their own process of leaving abusive husbands. By placing pressure on users to take action themselves, this approach reduced the danger of users losing heart midway and projecting blame onto the volunteers to divert potential aggression away from themselves.

Despite such precautions, volunteers were still exposed to hostility. In some cases, disgruntled husbands of women receiving support threatened volunteers, telling them to leave their wives alone. Further resistance came from conservative community forces, including from volunteers' relatives. As two volunteers recounted:

My brothers are against the NGO. One joined forces with others locally to combat the organization. . . . They called me up and said: '*You have stabbed me in the back*'. And they made my father call me, too. (Jawaria)

They [her ex-husband's family] told me: '*You are a whore*' and said many nasty things about me when I joined Sister Supporters . . . We want to empower women. Put them in charge of their own lives. (Darya)

Evidently, supporting women's rights in an ethnic minority context can be controversial (Sultana et al. 2023). To ensure that prospective volunteers could handle such pressures, admission as a Sister Supporters volunteer depended on both an elaborate screening process and the signing of a contract committing the volunteer to uphold NGO values, including unwavering respect for confidentiality. One staff member, Sandra, explained that they had to vet out women who were still '*stuck in the spiral of violence*. *The ones who make you think: "You cannot help others – you need help yourself"*'. Such screening becomes especially important given the broader societal context where violence against ethnic minority (and particularly Muslim) women is culturalized in public discourse (Keskinen 2009; Razack 2021). Thus, ostensible support for such women's rights may be deployed politically for exclusionary purposes (Farris 2017). The need to navigate this charged field underscores the importance of vetting prospective volunteers to pre-empt internal struggles over the purpose of the NGO.

The awareness that women who left their partners might return to them again made the organization underscore that users who lost heart were welcome to return for help later. The staff member Rana described how she was recently contacted by a woman who, years earlier, had given up on leaving her bad marriage. In a recent conversation the woman had reportedly told Rana:

"*That is what I like about you, Rana: You tell me that you never close the door. You do not get angry with me*". And I tell her that the door is always open. That is just the way it is'. (Rana)

This responsiveness, regardless of former setbacks, supported users' propensity to place trust in the NGO, and helped vulnerable women proceed through all nine phases of the help-seeking process, enabling them to embark on a life without abuse.

NGO support in negotiating barriers – navigating the phases of 'reject' and 'resolve'

In the Sarah Waller help-seeking model, phase 7 'Reject' has the subheading 'there is no help', reflecting the fact that minoritized women experiencing abuse can face substantial difficulties in gaining relevant and adequate support (Hulley et al. 2023; Sultana et al. 2023; Voolma 2018). The following two examples from Sisters Supporters' work show how the NGO has provided users with crucial support at junctures where the users felt 'there was no help'. The examples stem from the interview accounts of Tasleem and Bahija. Both women had past experiences of abuse and of receiving help from Sister Supporters. After leaving their abusive relationships, the two women became volunteers themselves.

Years before joining Sister Supporters, Tasleem had married a co-ethnic man, only to discover that he had severe mental health issues. The marriage ended a year later when the man tried to strangle Tasleem, making her flee to her mother's flat. The couple had only been married in an Islamic ritual – a *nikah* – not valid under Danish law (Liversage 2022a). Consequently, Tasleem could not apply for a divorce with the Danish authorities, who considered her unmarried. The man insisted that Tasleem was still his wife, as he had not agreed to ending their *nikah*, leaving Tasleem in a difficult situation. The man kept coming to the flat, where he . . . '*banged the door. And screamed . . . And phoned 1500 times*', leaving Tasleem too scared to move. Tasleem described how

'it was a really, really hard period. I did not know what to do. My family tried to help me, but they did not know what to do, either'.

Another case concerns Bahija. Before she joined Sister Supporters, she lived for years in an abusive marriage. When she finally managed to divorce her husband, he threatened to abduct their children and take them abroad (Liversage 2022b). As is common in Denmark, the divorced couple held joint custody, and therefore the ex-husband ... *'could easily get [the children X-country] passports and citizenships and take them out [of Denmark]. And no one would be able to stop him'*. Local frontline workers, including the police, dismissed Bahija when she inquired about options for gaining full custody to reduce the abduction risk. This response made Bahija *'cry for a whole week ... If my children disappeared, I would die'*. Both Tasleem and Bahija had felt at their wit's end. Despite seeking help for their predicaments, no such help was forthcoming, demonstrating the obstacles to accessing adequate support faced by IPV-exposed ethnic minority women. However, when the two women heard about Sister Supporters and turned to the NGO for help, they were able to proceed to phase 8 ('resolve') of the tough help-seeking processes they were going through.

NGO support for getting adequate help

Tasleem's troubles arose from the difficulties of dissolving her *nikah* – that is, obtaining a 'Muslim divorce'. In contrast to the unilateral access to no-fault divorce in Danish legislation, Muslim women may be considered dependent on their husbands' consent to fully end their marriages (Liversage 2022a; Petersen 2025) – challenges, where mainstream Danish service providers generally are of little use. Hearing from a friend that Sister Supporters helped women obtain a 'Muslim divorce', Tasleem contacted the staff member Rana. In contrast to mainstream service providers, Rana understood Tasleem's predicament, and put her in touch with the Mariam Mosque. While not accepted in all Muslim circles, this female-led Copenhagen-based mosque enables Muslim women to gain a no-fault divorce (Petersen 2022). Rana also introduced Tasleem to a knowledgeable police officer who helped Tasleem recover some of her possessions and signalled to her disgruntled ex-partner that Tasleem was supported by the Danish authorities. The NGO's bridge-building to frontline workers with specialized knowledge thus helped Tasleem resolve the challenges she faced.

In Bahija's case, a media story brought Sister Supporters to her attention. She reached out for help, even though she *'... had people in my social circle who did not want me to contact them'*. Bahija explained how Rana gave her *'the best help'*. First of all, circumventing the unaccommodating response of the local police, Rana introduced Bahija to a specialized police unit:

They knew about these kinds of problems [with international child abductions]: You can file charges even though you don't have proof. I told my story, and I got full custody, and the police contacted the airport, telling them that these children are at risk of being abducted. The police took me seriously when I had Rana with me – even though it was my word against his word. (Bahija)

Tasleem's and Bahija's experiences show how women can have pressing problems and urgent needs for active support during the behavioural (and sometimes dangerous) phases of the help-seeking process. The bridge-building support which the NGO provided the two women with during these phases differs substantially from the gradual trust-building and information-provision support of the early cognitive phases. Consequently, the NGO approach was not to engage volunteers in these behavioural phases but to let experienced staff members with relevant networks take the cases and move them forward.

Doing advocacy work to increase the quality of support

Sister Supporters staff members also try intervening on behalf of users to make authorities more responsive to users' needs. Such activities can be labelled advocacy work (Herbert and Mould 1992; Sullivan and Goodman 2019) – a type of work shown to have good potential for improving the well-being of abused women (Ogbe et al. 2020; Rivas et al. 2019). NGO advocacy work includes educating frontline workers about the particular needs of family migrants who risk losing their residency rights if they leave their husbands (Gangoli, Bates, and Hester 2020; Sultana et al. 2023). Many frontline workers are unaware of such needs. Rana (staff member) described the following about a recent case of helping a woman to a shelter:

We do all we can to document everything. Ensure that the police make a report. And if she's too scared to file a charge, we ensure that the police at least make an incident report, so there is at least some registration. Ensure that she tells her doctor to register [signs of abuse] in the medical records . . . She's in a new shelter [i.e. with limited expertise], so we tell them that: *'It's important that you make notes in your records'*. Because not all shelters know that they really have to do that. (Rana, staff member)

The above advocacy work addresses the deportation risk that marriage migrants can face after their marriage ends – a risk which can become reality if the documentation from police, doctors and shelters is inadequate (Slot et al. 2023). In other cases, staff members either advised frontline workers to look to specific, lesser-known, parts of Danish legislation, or tried to have users' cases transferred to specialists with more expertise. With research showing that ethnic minorities risk receiving substandard social service provisions due to factors such as language barriers, racism and a lack of adequate training among frontline workers, providing access to such specialized, high-quality support is indeed a pressing issue (Buzungu and Rugkása 2023; Eliassi 2017).

The restoration phase

The ninth and final phase in Sarah Waller's help-seeking model is the restoration phase, also called the *'getting my power back'* phase. In this phase, some users who had been helped by the NGO decided to become volunteers themselves. Becoming a peer supporter can be a way to transform understandings of personal experiences and gain more hope for the future through helping other women suffering from related predicaments (de Ven, Leferink, and Pemberton 2023; Lalayants et al. 2015; Mendoza et al. 2016). One example is Tasleem's trajectory; after obtaining her 'Muslim divorce', she was paired with a volunteer – a divorcee with prior abuse experiences – who helped her cope with the aftermath of her divorce, and supported her in rebuilding her social network (Prosman, Wong, and Lagro-Janssen 2014). A while later, Tasleem *'made the decision that I also want to be a part'*, and she applied to become a Sister Supporter herself.

Similarly, many of the interviewed volunteers explained that personal experiences with abusive relationships had motivated them to join the NGO. One woman said that she had joined because she *'wanted to pave the way for other women: [We are] women, who seek safety and trust with others, who have been through similar experiences. And who have moved on and seen the end of the tunnel'* (Mizna). Jawaria recounted that, in the wake of a recent divorce, she sat at home *'with all my frustrations, burning inside me'*. After learning about Sister Supporters on Facebook, she decided to join: *'I felt, I had to do something. Go and shout out loud. For the sake of my daughter and for the new generation . . . I want to help others who have been through what I have been through'*. Several volunteers also described how family and community members had both tried to keep women from ending troubled marriages and had stigmatized them after they left their husbands. Such experiences (also reported in e.g. Aboulhassan and Brumley (2019), Akpinar (2003) and Liversage (2022c), can evidently impede the restoration phase. In contrast, if women joined the NGO, they realized that

there are other women, who've been in same situation as me – or maybe even worse than me. So, I felt: 'Okay, I'm not alone'. I felt really safe, and I thought: 'I want to continue'. (Parvin)

When making this transition from NGO users to NGO volunteers, the women entered a supportive community, which they had lacked due to norms against divorce in their marginalized ethnic minority communities. Moreover, as Parvin states above, volunteers gained a sense of healing from giving other women the forms of support that volunteers themselves had pined for earlier in life (Shalaby and Agyapong 2020; Watson 2019). A woman who had been part of the NGO from its establishment explained that being a member . . .

gives me security. It tells me that I am not alone. It brings joy. It's like bandaging each other's wounds. It is like a chain – the more we are, the stronger we become. I feel strong with our group of sisters. I know that, anytime, I can seek help from them – or help them out. (Silaah, volunteer)

The peer-to-peer context thus makes it possible for women to use their '*lived experience to enable a transformation of a stigmatized experience into a source of competence and positive identity*' (Moran et al. 2012, 315). Calling other volunteers 'sisters' also underscores the communal nature of the organization which, in some cases, provided formerly isolated ethnic minority divorcees with a much-needed place to belong.

Conclusion

Ethnic minority women who experience interpersonal violence often face high barriers in accessing the support which is so central to leaving abusive relationships (Green, Satyen, and Toumbourou 2024; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2022; Sultana et al. 2023). Spurred by this gap in service provisions, this study investigated the Danish NGO Sister Supporters. The NGO applies a peer-to-peer approach that has been found to enhance service provision to, and the well-being of, vulnerable ethnic minority women (Ho et al. 2022; Hulley et al. 2023; Ogbe et al. 2020). The NGO's approach rests on addressing various needs at different phases of the nine-phase 'Sarah Waller' help-seeking model (Waller et al. 2023).

Central to Sister Supporters' approach is volunteers' use of both private and professional networks, as well as their cultural and linguistic competencies, to form bonds with vulnerable women they encounter in daily life. For example, as kindergarten teachers or beauticians, volunteers are able to gain contact with migrant women who are otherwise isolated by controlling partners (Kiamanesh and Hauge 2019; Schucan Bird, Stokes, and Rivas 2025; Vasil 2023). Through such contacts, volunteers may provide vulnerable women with the support they need to progress through the early cognitive phases of the help-seeking process (Waller et al. 2023). When doing so, volunteers pay keen attention to building and safeguarding trust. The shared identities of being female, being ethnic minorities and of often also sharing experiences of abuse contribute to trust-building between volunteers and users (De Prince et al. 2012; Guevara et al. 2024; Khelaifat 2018). Volunteers must, however, consider safety risks, as abusive husbands commonly escalate violence if they learn about wives seeking outside assistance (Sullivan and Goodman 2019). Accordingly, safety strategies figure prominently in volunteer training.

In the behavioural phases of the help-seeking process (where women act to leave abusive partners) migrant women exposed to IPV often face obstacles separating them from adequate mainstream system support (Buzungu and Rugkåsa 2023; Green, Satyen, and Toumbourou 2024). If the needs of vulnerable women (e.g. family migrants with an insecure residency status) are not met well, it can both create risks for the vulnerable women (Innes et al. 2024; Segrave 2021; Vasil 2023) and undermine the trustworthiness of an NGO such as Sister Supporters. The NGO addresses these challenges by doing advocacy work to ensure responsiveness from frontline workers (e.g. police officers and shelter personnel) and/or by having complex cases transferred to specialized services. Carried out by staff members rather than volunteers, this professional component is an indispensable part of Sister Supporters' approach.

Some users of the NGO become volunteers themselves. Doing so can be part of the final ‘restoration phase’, moving on from abusive relationships. Sister Supporters is thus also a community where female volunteers can support each other, counteracting the stigma and isolation that divorced ethnic minority women can otherwise face. Hence, volunteers instill hope in each other and provide a forum where they can put difficult life experiences to constructive use (de Ven, Leferink, and Pemberton 2023).

Sister Supporters operates in a contested field and NGO members experience pressure from conservative forces in immigrant communities, as their all-female peer approach challenges established power hierarchies. In their work, the NGO must also navigate the risks of being coopted by exclusionary forces seeking to utilize the topic of abuse in ethnic minority families to stigmatize entire minority groups (Farris 2017; Keskinen 2009). The ability of Sister Supporters to both help a considerable number of vulnerable individuals and provide volunteers with a strong and supportive community is thus a considerable accomplishment, and indicates a path forward in better meeting complex support needs in increasingly multicultural societies.

Note

1. This concept, coined by Swedish researcher Eva Lundgren (1989), was part of volunteer training.

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Data availability statement

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