Leaving a Violent Relationship

Edited by
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MDPI

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Cover image courtesy of Sandeep Rathod. (Winner of the 'None In Three India' 2020 poster competition depicting violence against women)

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About the Editor

Adele Jones is a Professor of Social Work at the University of Huddersfield, UK and Director/Founder of the None in Three Centre for the Global Prevention of Gender-Based Violence (www.noneinthree.org). The centre is named in recognition that one in three females will experience violence in their lifetime, the None in Three Centre specializes in the use of prosocial computer games to engage young people across the world in changing the attitudes, norms, and behaviors that fuel gender-based violence. Having led or been involved in research in 23 countries, her expertise spans violence against women and children, refugees, the impact of HIV-AIDS, children of imprisoned parents, adoption and residential care. She has numerous publications to her name and was lead author for a series of three scholarly texts on child sexual abuse in the Caribbean, the first in the region: *Understanding Child Sexual Abuse: Perspectives from the Caribbean; An Integrated Systems Model for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Perspectives from the Caribbean; and Treating Child Sexual Abuse in Family, Group and Clinical Settings—Culturally Intelligent Practice for Caribbean and International Contexts*. Her most recent work has resulted in new research into the social and cultural factors implicated in violence against women and children, and education interventions to support social change, in Barbados, Grenada, St Lucia, Jamaica, India, the UK, Uganda, and Brazil.

Preface to "Leaving a Violent Relationship"

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse and controlling behaviours inflicted within intimate partner relationships, is a global crisis that extends beyond national and sociocultural boundaries, affecting people of all ages, religions, ethnicities and economic backgrounds. Although women can be violent towards their partners (male, female, transgender or non-binary), IPV is most commonly perpetrated by males towards females, and the overwhelming global burden is thus borne by women. Indeed, the World Health Organisation estimates that worldwide, one in three women will experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime (2013).

People often ask of women in abusive relationships "why does she stay?" Critics suggest that this question carries implicit notions of victim blame and fails to hold to account the perpetrators of abuse. Targeted at the individual, it can mask societal and institutional failings that create barriers to leaving (Barnett 2000). A better question might be "why doesn't he stop?" since this would direct the attention to where responsibility lies, would bring into focus the limitations of criminal justice systems, and would enable a more nuanced approach to understanding the multiple ways through which survivors of abuse can become trapped within violent relationships (Jones et al. 2017).

The purpose of this book, then, is to deepen understandings of survivor agency and of the structural and interpersonal factors which facilitate or hinder escape from abuse. There are often major barriers to leaving a violent relationship and a multiplicity of factors to consider (Anderson et al. 2003). For some women, especially those from poor and marginalised groups, the choices may be very limited, while for others, staying may actually be a calculated survival decision under the circumstances in which they live their lives (Heise et al. 1999). Discourse has, however, changed over recent years, and new alliances to support women have emerged. Across the world, public disinterest about IPV has increasingly given way to public disquiet, largely as a consequence of renewed local and international activism. Such campaigns enable survivors to speak out and speaking out can be the precursor or catalyst to accessing the help needed to leave.

Then, in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic happened! During humanitarian crises such as conflict, natural disasters or, health epidemics, violence against women often escalates. Past epidemics, including Ebola and Zika, have shown that as outbreaks affect social and economic life, risks and vulnerabilities also increase. Governments urged populations to "lock down" and practice social distancing to safeguard against the transmission of the Corona virus but failed to recognise the risks intrinsic in this advice for women living with abuse; the very measures designed to protect could be used by the perpetrators of violence to isolate victims of abuse and prevent them from getting help.

Therefore, we must be reminded, lest we forget, that the gains of activism against gender-based violence, though hard won, are easily lost.

This book comprises eight chapters and provides new theoretical understandings on intimate partner violence as well as insights into the experiences of marginalised and diverse groups of survivors. In chapter one, David McLeod, Kirsten Havig, Anthony Natale and Angela Pharris discuss emerging theoretical perspectives on IPV. Drawing on intersectionality, decolonization theory and the posttraumatic growth paradigm, the authors use a constructivist lens to elucidate theoretical frameworks that are of value for clinical practice with vulnerable people as well as for policy and research. In chapter two, Luz Adriana Aristizábal describes her research into the experiences of Colombian women, which explored the interaction between co-dependency, violent relationships and

female crime. She argues that enabling women to leave requires the strengthening of interventions that empower women while they are in prison as well as after release.

Ana Isabel Sani and Dora Pereira conducted research among a group of mothers in Portugal (chapter three) and concluded that the reasons for remaining in an abusive relationship were related to extrinsic factors (e.g., children, the aggressor, society) which reinforce myths (e.g., marriage is for life) and make it difficult to leave. They suggest that the resilience portfolio model, which focuses on three major factors (self-regulation, interpersonal forces, and construction of meaning) is a useful tool for interventions that enable survivors to reconceptualize the factors that prevent leaving. Through the process of ascribing new meanings to experience, women can be empowered to take actions to protect themselves and their children.

The study described in chapter four was also set in Portugal. Sónia Caridade, Inês Pinheiro and Maria Dinis present a qualitative analysis of the reasons and barriers young people give for leaving or staying in a violent dating relationship. The emotional and affective dependence of the partner and the belief that behaviour may change emerged as the main reasons participants remained, while shame, fear of losing the partner, and failure to recognize the abusive relationship were reported as the main barriers to leaving. The authors make the point that given the importance of disrupting potential trajectories of victimization during the adolescent stage of development, these insights are essential for promoting help-seeking behaviours among survivors of dating violence.

Chapter five, "When Sexting Crosses the Line: Educator Responsibilities in the Support of Prosocial Adolescent Behavior and the Prevention of Violence", also focused on adolescents, examines sexting within the context of IPV. Melinda Lemke and Katelyn Rogers undertake a critical analysis of the connections between adolescent sexting as consensual adolescent behavior and sexting as a form of sexual violence. By weighing the prosocial aspects of sexting against those factors that contribute to and make it difficult to leave a violent relationship, the authors provide crucial information for education policy.

In Chapter six, Esther Nanfuka, Florence Turyomurugyendo, Eric Ochen and Graham Gibbs investigated IPV among women who had been child brides in Uganda. Their retrospective study, with 26 Ugandan women who married before they were 18, identified four main factors that helped child marriage survivors to leave violent relationships: (1) having a secure base to return to; (2) reaching a tipping point in the relationship; (3) financial independence; and (4) intervention of a significant other. In conclusion, Esther Nanfuka and her colleagues suggest that in low resource settings, such as Uganda, parental support is a key facilitative factor for leaving violent relationships in the context of child marriage, and argue that positive parenting interventions may significantly contribute to minimising the number of girls trapped in violent unions.

Chapter seven describes the use of a Black Feminist Standpoint Epistemology to analyze the experiences of, and choices available to, women of south Asian heritage living in the UK. The authors, Kalwinder Sandhu and Hazel Barrett, investigate the ways in which these women navigated their way around gender role expectations and the pressures to conform to arranged marriage. Though they were able to exercise agentic power in the relationship choices they made, having done so, this left them without access to family support if the relationship turned violent and made it very difficult to leave. The final chapter assesses cultural responsiveness among agencies providing services to refugee women impacted by IPV in the United States of America. Jessica Lucero, Kristina Scharp and Tanni Hernandez demonstrate that in order to effectively support refugees who are seeking safety from violent relationships, organisations need to improve language services. They further argue

that the engagement of refugee communities in the design and delivery of programs is essential to ensuring services are culturally sensitive.

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Adele Jones
Editor

Article

Intimate Partner Violence: Innovations in Theory to Inform Clinical Practice, Policy, and Research

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Abstract: Intimate partner violence (IPV) and intergenerational transmission of IPV in families are destructive social issues in need of considerable attention. Knowledge of the multi-level, complex causes, and consequences of IPV in the United States has increased significantly over the last two decades. Given these gains in learning, the authors' aim here is to highlight recent critical and emerging theoretical perspectives on IPV. Frameworks included for application are intersectionality theory, historical trauma and decolonization, human rights, constructivist self-development theory, the posttraumatic growth paradigm, and adverse childhood experiences. This discussion will help to illuminate the dynamics of IPV that are actionable by practitioners using frameworks that promote cultural sensitivity, inclusion, and strengths-based practice with diverse populations. The authors discuss the scope of IPV while focusing on critical vulnerable people and exploring issues of relative privilege and oppression. Next, the authors review the historical body of theory informing understandings of IPV, and emerging theoretical frameworks on IPV. We offer conclusions throughout as they relate to the application of highlighted theories to IPV.

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1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a social injustice and significant public health issue in the United States that negatively affects individuals, families, and communities systemically and across generations. Over the last several decades, a reflexive process involving IPV narratives of lived experiences, grassroots activism, policymaking, program and service development, research, and education has built the US service systems that are in place today. While some gaps have closed in addressing the systemic effects of IPV, the problem has not abated. The authors of this paper aim to participate in this process by providing a focused review of and reflection on, emerging theoretical perspectives on IPV that hold promise to address the problem. Specifically, the authors aim to provide practitioners and those in clinical training with a unique theoretical analysis of IPV that results in implications for practice, policy, and research.

1.1. The Importance and Role of Theory for Practice

A theory provides the foundation for understanding human behavior in the social environment and underlies actions taken by practitioners to engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate practice. Core social work values, including service, value for the dignity of every individual, the importance of human relationships, self-determination, and professional integrity, further guide practice (National

Association of Social Workers 2016). These values undergird the promotion of social, economic, gender, and racial justice. Given the importance of theory to practice across levels and fields, it is crucial to continually develop this theoretical base in a manner that is consistent with the social justice goals of the social work profession and to adapt to changing contexts in the environment. It is our aim here to shed light on emergent frameworks for IVP practice. Drawing from interdisciplinary work in sociology, psychology, public health, medicine, gender studies, and the social work literature, we overview the literature on theoretical perspectives that have informed IPV understandings. Overviewed next are theoretical frameworks that offer new IPV considerations including, intersectionality theory, historical trauma and decolonization, human rights, constructivist self-development theory, the posttraumatic growth paradigm, and adverse childhood events (ACEs). We acknowledge these emergent frameworks are underutilized and warrant more inclusion in research, practice, research, and education. Table 1 provides an introduction to key concepts helpful to the organization, conceptualization, and application of theory to IPV research, practice, and policy.

Table 1. Key Concepts.

Prevalence	Despite increasing bodies of literature and overall public awareness, nearly half of both women and men report experiencing at least one form of intimate partner violence in their personal histories.
Differential Impact	Intimate partner violence disproportionately impacts women, racial and sexual minorities, particularly regarding physical and sexual violence and the effects thereof.
Historical Theories & IPV	Multiple theories have been used to explain the phenomenon of IPV. Over time, psychological, sociological, and biological theories have influenced the ways people conceptualize IPV, however feminist frameworks have most likely had the largest impact on IPV conceptualization over the past several decades.
New Theoretical Developments	Most recently, theories of intersectionality and human rights have proven useful in explaining the complicated and individualized nature of IPV. Additionally, theories associated with adverse childhood experiences and the intergenerational transmission of violence, among others, have shaped the context of how people conceptualize the development of IPV.
Posttraumatic Growth & Impact on post IPV life	Theories of posttraumatic growth and constructivist self-development have been used to conceptualize how people can move forward in a healthy way after experiencing IPV. Additionally, these types of theories had shed light on the difficulty associated with sustaining healthy relationships and a positive family environment after experiencing IPV.

1.2. Intimate Partner Violence: Current Conceptualizations

IPV is a pattern of coercive behaviors that uses power and control by one partner against another and may include many different forms of exploitation and abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual, reproductive, and economic (Black et al. 2011; Danis and Bhandari 2010). Historically, several challenges have impacted researchers' ability to quantify IPV experiences within the United States. Legal definitions of IPV criminal offenses vary by State. A variety of entities for different purposes track IPV data, including child welfare, criminal investigation and prosecution, civil protection orders, use of health care services by victims, and utilization of shelter services. To address this, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued uniform IPV definitions and a common language for research that takes into account teen dating violence, and same-sex couples and transgender individuals (Breiding et al. 2015).

1.3. IPV Problem Scope

Findings from the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (Smith et al. 2018) reveal that nearly half of both women and men reported experiencing at least one form of psychological aggression (i.e., insults, coercive control, etc.) by a partner over their lifetime. Further, 36% of women and 21% of men will experience a form of IPV in their lifetime. Twenty people per minute or ten million individuals annually are victims of physical violence. Annually, 6,000,000 Americans stalk their intimate partners.

The study further revealed that 71% of females and 55.8% of male victims first experience IPV before the age of 25 (Smith et al. 2017).

1.4. Women and IPV

Women shoulder the disproportionate effects of IPV, with an estimated 6 million female victims each year in the United States (Smith et al. 2018). Of these assaults, 28.1% resulted in the need for medical care at an average cost of $548 per assault (Chrisler and Ferguson 2006). In terms of physical partner violence alone, the lifetime prevalence among U.S. women is 36.4%, or over 43.6 million women affected. According to the survey results, physical violence has a prevalence of 31% for women during their lifetime. Annually, 1.5 million women experience sexual assault perpetrated by their intimate partners (Smith et al. 2018).

1.5. Indigenous Women and IPV

Indigenous women in the U.S. are at a higher risk for stalking, rape, other sexual violence, and physical violence by an intimate partner in comparison to Black, Latina, and White women (Smith et al. 2017). More than four in five American Indian and Alaska Native women (84.3%) have experienced violence in their lifetime (Rosay 2010). When compared to other races, this percentage is the highest. Unlike most other populations where IPV and other forms of violence are usually intra-racial, evidence suggests that American Indian and Alaska Native women are more likely to be assaulted by someone who is of non-Native descent. Compounding the impact for indigenous women have been jurisdictional issues that erect barriers for IPV protection, prosecution, and prevention. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) addressed these gaps in the 2013 reauthorization, and support now included pilot programs in tribal courts.

1.6. Same-Sex Couples and IPV

Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) indicate that IPV also impacts same-sex couples, revealing that 21.5% of men and 35.4% of women living with a same-sex partner experienced IPV during their lifetime, compared with 7.1% and 20.4% for men and women, respectively, who cohabitate as opposite-sex couples. The *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, released in 2013 with new analysis revealing victimization by sexual orientation, showed that the lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner was 43.8% for lesbians, 61.1% for bisexual women, and 35% for heterosexual women (Black et al. 2011). It also indicated that 26% of gay men, 37.3% of bisexual men, and 29% of heterosexual men report the same. While research on the experiences of transgender individuals remains limited, studies have indicated that members of this population are at higher risk not only for IPV but also systemic and systematic barriers, including institutional discrimination when seeking services (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs [NCAVP] 2013).

1.7. Children and IPV

The *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* report on children's exposure to intimate partner and family violence indicates five million children, or one in 15, witnessed IPV (Hamby et al. 2010b). McDonald et al. (2006) estimate that 15 million children annually witness IPV. Of the reported cases, one million of these children witnessed severe abuse, defined as beating, kicking, and choking; additionally, 4.3 million children experienced various forms of psychological or emotional violence. The impact for children who witness IPV are both immediate and long-term, negatively affecting a myriad of mental and physical health outcomes, and often resulting in the intergenerational transmission of violence (Dube et al. 2002; Anda et al. 2006). Yates et al. (2003) found that exposure to IPV in preschool predicted problem behavior at 16 for both sexes. Russell et al. (2010) detail how frequent exposure (more than ten times) to IPV as a child corresponds to college-age clinical depression. Hamby et al. (2010a) report from a national survey of youth that more than half of those who become victims of statutory rape or sexual misconduct witnessed IPV as children.

2. Overview of Theoretical Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence

Theoretical perspectives for IPV-related research and intervention may be sociological, psychological, or biological. A review of the literature reveals the application of ecological and systems theories, social learning theory (Barnes et al. 2013; Cochran et al. 2011), social disorganization theory, personality theories, self-control theory, family violence theory, exchange/social control theories, and resource theory (Dixon and Graham-Kevan 2011; Lawson 2012). Barnes et al. (2013) applied social learning theory and the role of inherent genetic factors to understand the intergenerational nature of IPV and highlight the complex interaction of nature and nurture. In her discussion of sociological perspectives on IPV, Lawson (2012) underscores the importance of theory as a pathway for framing IPV as not an individual-level problem, but as a function of social stratification of structures. She further discusses ecological theories aimed at understanding IPV in the family context with an eye to the role of conflict in the manifestation of violence.

Approaching IPV from biological, social, or psychological sciences provides several theoretical perspectives. In their review of biological and psychological theories applied to the problem of IPV, Ali and Naylor (2013a) discuss the impact of head injury, as well as attachment theory, and the role of anger, self-esteem, communication skills, and substance abuse in the etiology of IPV. In a companion review, Ali and Naylor (2013b) also provide an overview of feminist, social, and ecological theories on IPV causation. They highlight the cycle of violence, learned helplessness, battered women syndrome, patriarchy, and power, as well as social learning theory, resource theory, and the nested ecological framework central to person-in-environment models. Eriksson and Mazerolle (2013) propose general strain theory as a framework for understanding domestic homicide, underscoring the role of stress and coping. While many theories focus on individual factors leading to IPV, Blumenstein and Jasinski (2015) applied social disorganization theory based on the idea that factors such as concentrated social disadvantage, population heterogeneity, and residential instability impact violent behaviors. The theory of planned behavior features a public health perspective and aims to help predict abusive behaviors (Betts et al. 2011).

Arguably most instrumental in shaping the current understanding of IPV is feminist theory. The feminist framework allows for illumination of the impact of gender roles and gender-based inequality across issues. Bell and Naugle (2008), among others, directly attribute the phenomenon of violence against women to the patriarchy that enforces male supremacy and control. The feminist perspective has underpinned scholarly, grassroots, and practice professional efforts to understand and respond to IPV. The legacy of feminist efforts in this arena continues to be an indispensable framework for IPV. Feminist scholars' important contributions include concepts such as the cycle of violence, learned helplessness, the battered woman's syndrome, dynamics of power and control, male control theory, social control social disorganization, bystander theory, self-determination theory, and the role of patriarchy (Ali and Naylor 2013a). A significant turn in feminist theory occurred through the work of Black feminist writers with the introduction of intersectionality (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991).

3. Into the Future: Critical and Innovative Theories to Inform IPV-Related Practice and Research, Which Is Explored in More Detail Next

3.1. Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory provides both a theory and a mechanism for change by revealing complex systemic oppression (i.e., racism, heterosexism, sexism, cisgenderism). Emergent from, and a response to the mainstream, mostly White feminism, Black feminists called attention to their relative invisibility within the movement. Crenshaw (1991) distinguishes the lived experiences of violence against women of color from White women as a function of race, class, and other social categories (i.e., gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration/citizenship status, etc.) Crenshaw's intersectionality theory contends that social hierarchies systematically and unfairly marginalize some members of society while granting other members unfair advantage (Crenshaw 1991). In applying this perspective to the

problem of male violence against women, Crenshaw offered a much more nuanced, inclusive, and informed lens for understanding the varied lived experience of IPV and the multiple subordinations experienced by women of color. Her work also addresses the unique dynamics of IPV for groups such as homeless women and immigrant women and the need for shelters and support programming to critically appraise their work with these complexities in mind. Intersectionality provides a critical and unique lens through which to view the realities of vulnerable and oppressed people concerning issues such as IPV that move beyond mainstream hegemonic knowledge. Building on that work, Gillum (2019) explores the interrelatedness of race, poverty, and IPV. By demonstrating the realities of the disproportionate impact of IPV in Black communities in both developed and developing countries, she brings to light the unique vulnerabilities rooted in race and class. The dynamics of poverty and race interact with IPV such that powerlessness, isolation, and stress become mutually reinforcing (Goodman et al. 2009). This knowledge highlights the importance of contextualized interventions for low-income women exposed to IPV.

An understanding of the intersection of race and class is important to the response to IPV. The intersectional dimensions of IPV are also clear when applied to the experiences of gender and sexual minority (SGM) individuals. In 2015, the CDC published updated guidelines for defining and collecting data on IPV, which included new insights relevant for work with same-sex and transgender people. For example, methods of coercion and control exist that are unique to the SGM population exist, such as threatening to out the partner at work or withholding prescribed hormones from an individual transitioning gender (Breiding et al. 2015). The use of coercive threats is also significant for HIV-impacted individuals through threats of outing or withholding of HIV medication (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs [NCAVP] 2013). The ability to define, research, and discuss IPV in terms that recognize the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of diverse, unique groups is central to sensitive and effective prevention and intervention. Intersectionality has emerged as an important vehicle for enhancing culturally sensitive and relevant teaching and practice, and in attending to social inequalities and their impact on research (May 2015; Murphy et al. 2009).

Intersectionality, in regards to IPV, complicates the matter even further when exploring help-seeking behaviors and access to assistance. Using this lens allows for a deconstruction of the complexities of the intersections of gender, race, and ability, in addition to sexual orientation, immigration status, accent, and socioeconomic status. Cramer and Plummer (2009) examined the application of intersectionality theory as related to gender, race, and disability. Their findings bring a new perspective to outdated assumptions of universalism in IPV by illustrating the complexity and uniqueness of women's IPV experiences. The conclusions underscore limitations in existing knowledge frames and service models rooted in the lack of attention to human diversity. Intersectionality's influence on the 2013 version of VAWA is evident, with immigrants, LGBTQ+, and Indigenous people added. This landmark legislation reflects the evolution of thinking about IPV and the impact of intersectionality theory.

3.2. Human Rights

Human Rights is an applicable lens that holds a set of goals in an international context and offers solid grounding for the promotion of social justice in all practice areas with particular importance for policy practice. A Human Rights framework has the advantage of addressing those essential rights as associated with being born rather than based on a hierarchy of need or worth. Among the United Nations documents explaining the nature of human rights is *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. Often viewed as an international bill of rights for women, it addresses violence against women as a human rights violation exacerbating the subordination of women and girls globally. While challenges abound in realizing the spirit and aims of CEDAW in the U.S. (Morgaine 2006), it remains a useful framework for moving forward education, research, and practice. The connections made in CEDAW between political rights and participation, economic opportunity, bodily integrity, and reproductive

rights, freedom from violence, and autonomy for women are highly relevant and useful to promoting a holistic, politicized understanding of IPV (UN General Assembly 1979). These connections are critical to the aims of defending the vulnerable, challenging injustice, honoring human diversity, promoting self-determination, valuing human dignity and relationships, and recognizing the complex nature of the human experience. CEDAW tenants, and other human rights documents, provide a framework to understand better the causes, consequences, and remedies for IPV.

3.3. Acknowledging Historical Trauma and Decolonizing IPV Knowledge and Response

The concept of historical trauma aids in understanding IPV among indigenous people. The lens of historical trauma allows us to view trauma across time, not only as it exists in the life of an individual, but for a targeted group, at the family level, which accumulates in genetic DNA. Josephy (1991) summarized a vast amount of European and American historical sources to demonstrate the violence that began with colonization and continued throughout the development of the United States, with females as key targets for social control through sexual violence. Brave Heart (1998) described the impact of this historical, collective group violence generationally as historical trauma. For Native American women in the U.S., this means viewing the individual and family experience of IPV against a backdrop of centuries of violence, degradation, and genocide perpetrated upon women's bodies. Clinical work, policy advocacy, organizational and program planning, as well as research and education, will not respond to the experiences, needs, and strengths of indigenous women without consideration of historical trauma and its impact on individuals and families.

The field has largely not yet responded to the call for decolonization of research, education, and practice. Only a few studies acknowledge the continued colonized nature of service and policy impacting IPV work. In the introduction to her revolutionary work examining this history, Smith (2005) writes that:

> The remedies for addressing sexual and domestic violence utilized by the antiviolence movement have proven to be generally inadequate for addressing the problems of gender violence in general, but particularly for addressing violence against women of color. The problem is not simply an issue of providing multicultural services to survivors of violence. Rather, the analysis of and strategies for addressing gender violence have failed to address the manner in which gender violence is not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but also serves as a tool of racism and colonialism. That is, colonial relationships are themselves gendered and sexualized. (1)

Doing this work requires collaboration and an intentional partnership with indigenous people in order to understand the phenomenon within the context of their lives, and from their own perspectives. Hernández-Wolfe (2011) explored "borderland epistemology" (p. 293) and the need to decolonize mental health by deconstructing systems of power and privilege imposed upon indigenous peoples. Further, decolonization of mental health means acting on the values of cultural humility and cultural equity in our approaches to assessing, intervening with, and evaluating practice (Hernández-Wolfe 2011). This suggests existing models of intervention, developed, standardized, and evaluated outside of indigenous communities, have the potential to serve as extensions of colonization and oppression.

Intervention and research on IPV with colonized populations may exacerbate rather than alleviate problems. Trout et al. (2018) highlight the harm done not only by the historical trauma experienced by indigenous and other cultural groups but of the use of service strategies that only recapitulate those harms. To root those systems of care in empirical inquiry as well as in a critical and decolonizing stance, researchers must respond in kind (Smith 2013). Commitment to an intersectional approach and honoring the cultural traditions and tragedies of diverse groups is critical to sound, effective, and sensitive IPV prevention. In the absence of these frameworks, the lived experiences of diverse people will remain largely invisible, with social justice aims unrealized.

3.4. Applications of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Perspective to IPV

The ongoing examination of trauma throughout the lifespan influences IPV research, policy, and practice. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study was significant in establishing the connection between social and behavioral causes of poor adult health outcomes rooted in adverse childhood experiences. ACEs lead to social, emotional, and cognitive impairments that, in turn, precipitate risk-taking behaviors, early disease onset, and social problems (Brown et al. 2009; Felitti et al. 1998). As risk factors for poor health outcomes are cumulative over time, the importance of understanding these pathways is evident. The salience of adverse childhood experiences to adult health behaviors and outcomes is apparent (Anda et al. 2008; Dube et al. 2002; Lamers-Winkelman et al. 2012). ACEs related research points to both the importance of trauma-focused interventions for adult survivors as well as an early intervention for children.

Exposure or witnessing IPV during childhood is one of the ten significant early childhood traumatic events. Young children (birth–five years) are at the highest risk of exposure to adverse events (Ippen et al. 2011; Lieberman et al. 2011). Exposure for children may result in the development of mood and anxiety disorders (McLaughlin et al. 2010), developmental disruptions, distorted cognitive schemas, behavior and learning problems, obesity, and other health problems (Burke et al. 2011; Dube et al. 2002). Children exposed to IPV commonly experience other adverse events such as substance abuse, mental illness, incarcerated family members, and other forms of abuse and neglect (Turner et al. 2010). This phenomenon is known as co-occurring adverse experiences of poly-victimization. For example, Summers (2006) noted that poverty and racial discrimination increase children's vulnerability to other risks. Children are more likely to witness intimate partner violence when it occurs in the home and are more likely to experience multiple forms of abuse or neglect when living in a violent home (Cohen and Mannarino 2008; Dube et al. 2002; Lamers-Winkelman et al. 2012). Whitfield et al. (2003) revealed that exposure to all three events (physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing IPV) increases IPV adult perpetration or victimization risk two-fold.

Parenting behaviors impact exposure to IPV, with decreases in positive parenting behaviors and parent–child engagement, noted when parents have historical or current IPV experience. Studies have speculated a *spillover hypothesis* wherein the negative psychological impact associated with IPV for parents manifests within the parent–child relationships (Postmus et al. 2012). Rossman and Rea (2005) report parent stress, inconsistent parenting practices, and a loss of confidence in parenting ability elevate the risk of IPV (Rossman and Rea 2005). Importantly, researchers have also found that parents who have experienced IPV create buffers and safety for their children, have increased awareness of children's needs and empathy for the impact of the violence, and actively apply lessons about healthy relationships (Anderson 2011; Murray et al. 2012; Peled and Gil 2011; Renner 2009).

ACEs are "perpetrated" by a parent or caregiver in the home, so the framework is useful for understanding the intergenerational transmission of violence. Compelling evidence suggests adults with exposure to IPV during childhood are more likely to be a victim of IPV or a perpetrator in their intimate adult relationships (Lesesne and Kennedy 2005). While the intergenerational consequences of ACEs are clear, the underlying process remains largely unexplored (Brown et al. 2009). How violence victimization and perpetration forms, and how to best intervene is unclear. This research could impact the lives of survivors by preventing the host of negative IPV exposure outcomes. There also remains a need to better understand children's resilience to IPV exposure as well as the cumulative negative effects of violent exposure on adult difficulties (Hamby et al. 2010b).

4. Posttraumatic Growth

Intimate partner violence exposure may result in a variety of negative consequences, but they can also stimulate posttraumatic growth. Researchers have found the presence of enhanced potential for meaning-making of life lessons to create a positive future from a troubled past (Anderson 2011; Calhoun and Tedeschi 2001). Posttraumatic growth following childhood exposure to IPV may involve

a strong commitment to avoiding or preventing traumatic exposure as an adult and for one's children rooted in their perspective of what to avoid (Anderson 2011).

From a posttraumatic growth perspective, researchers have also demonstrated that adult women exposed as children to their mothers battering by an intimate partner may emerge with greater knowledge of the impact of trauma and the process of recovery (Anderson 2011). Adults exposed to domestic violence as children can gain significant wisdom and resilience, and a commitment to ending violence by processing disengagement, rumination, and meaning-making. This process of cognitive restructuring, of examining and rebuilding altered and distorted schemas, is key to growth and wellbeing after trauma (Anderson 2011). Exploring posttraumatic growth processes is as important as continuing research into posttraumatic stress and negative health impacts stemming from adverse experiences.

Constructivist Self-Development Theory

Constructivist Self-Development Theory (CSDT) illuminates how traumatic events like exposure to violence during childhood can produce both negative and, at times, positive impacts for the affected individual (Blain et al. 2011; Pearlman 1997; Wright et al. 2009) Consistent with Children's Health Equity Solutions Center's (CHESC) "individual differences" theme, CSDT views differences in children's beliefs, and cognitive schemas about violence alter how exposure to violence manifests in their adult lives. Likewise, paralleling the CHESC's "context matters" theme, CSDT posits that both socioeconomic and temporal contexts of violence exacerbate or minimize the downstream consequences of violence exposure.

Perhaps most valuable is that CSDT provides a framework for assessing and treating trauma responses under the assertion that cognitive schemas form through traumatic exposure. These schemas can be targets for intervention to repair or replace problematic schema contributing to risk-taking, poor decision-making, and disrupted wellbeing. It is constructivist in that it views individuals as building and shaping realities rooted in cognitive processes and shaped by the environment throughout the human life-course. This theoretical lens works to illuminate the processes underlying the trajectories of trauma-exposed children to adulthood and parenting. Five areas underscored by CDST include frame of reference, self-capacities, ego resources, perceptual and memory system, and central psychological needs. An individual's central psychological needs include five key areas: safety, trust, control, esteem, and intimacy (McCann and Pearlman 1992; Pearlman 1997). These concepts are highly applicable to building a person-centered IPV dialog, rooted in the perceptions and lived experiences of diverse individuals.

5. Future Research

Future empirical studies that advance theoretical frameworks for exploring IPV are necessary. Studies should draw from the methods of a variety of traditions, both qualitative and quantitative. In particular, qualitative research assists in revealing individual narratives of those who successfully navigated living through the trauma of family violence, and developed meaning in life not despite, but because of adversity (Hardesty and Chung 2006). Such inquiry is useful to inform generalizable quantitative studies detailing components of resilience from family violence. Perhaps the data developed could be used for ongoing efforts to measure resilience (Anderson 2011; Langhinrichsen-Rohling 2005). Moreover, research is needed to help quantify and investigate the individualized nature of internalized trauma. Deficit-based studies have served to identify high-risk situations and to improve intervention efforts and could expand by measuring healing, resilience, and growth (Hardesty and Chung 2006). Research in deficit-based models assumes that the scars of trauma are the same for all people or exist in the absence of growth. Practitioners know that not to be the case, and further research is needed to understand how to intervene in traumatic events. Studies that test concepts such as resiliency, empowerment, and hope relative to IPV are promising and critically important to interventions that build upon survivorship (Munoz et al. 2016;

Munoz et al. 2017). Concepts of resilience, hope, and posttraumatic growth are also important when applied at the population level to addressing issues of historical trauma while revealing culturally based strengths and solutions.

6. Conclusions

Each of the theoretical frameworks discussed above provides insights for IPV practice, research, and policy. Practitioners must continue to mold IPV programming across the lifespan that acknowledges and responds to human diversity and differences. Explicitly, students in clinical training require content in how to consume empirical literature systematically and to critically analyze that traumatic event "X" does not always produce a generalizable outcome "Y" among their client base (Addy et al. 2015). Nothing is a more dangerous misuse of practice privilege, than to engage with IPV survivors based on assumptions. The limitations of theory must be omnipresent in training not to provide a false sense of assuredness, particularly for those new to clinical training.

Professional practice relies on theoretical frameworks to inform our understandings of human behavior as well as research-grounded programs and evidence-based interventions. It is imperative, to better serve these populations throughout the lifespan and across multiple intersecting systems of oppression, that practitioners recognize their own personal and professional bias as well as those of theories (Dixon and Graham-Kevan 2011; McMahon and Armstrong 2012). The theoretical perspectives through which we frame the world and the lived experiences of clients served has a direct connection to hope in the lives of the most vulnerable (Lockhart and Danis 2010). As practice advances, practitioners must continue to spend adequate time assessing for the mediators of adversity, the impact of social stratification, and reframing to evaluate experiences of trauma at their intersection with resiliency to maximize theoretical utility. Failure to do so will leave the practitioner with a static view of IPV, rather than a progressive lens that is sensitive to time, culture, and context.

Additionally, those involved in IPV research and practice must continue to develop more nuanced and improved ways to assess for the experiences and effects of IPV in ways both critical and inclusive (Lockhart and Danis 2010). To improve IPV service delivery, a focus on not only client readiness but how violence, oppression, and marginalization exacerbate experiences is needed. Further, the person-in-environment model must be inclusive of the community level and time, as revealed by the historical trauma lens. Table 2 displays summaries of the implications in this area for practice, policy, and research.

Table 2. Practice, Policy and Research Implications.

	Implications for IPV Theories
Practice	Intervention and programming associated with IPV should consider the developments in theories related to intersectionality and posttraumatic growth. Opportunities for survivors to own their personal narratives and be involved in the process of defining their individualized experiences is vital.
Policy	Policy developments should consider the ways IPV is quantified and expand from traditional definitions centered on evidence of physical altercations, to include dynamics associated with psychological and emotional violence. Policies should also consider the evidence related to intergenerational transmission of violence and connections between experiences of household violence across their lifespan.
Research	Additional research is needed to evaluate the incorporation of modern theoretical approaches into intervention programming (ex. content related to experiences of violence across their lifespan). Research is also needed to improve assessment protocols used to identify the presence of violence in relationships and quantify the impact of all types (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, etc.) of IPV on all members of the family unit.

In conclusion, IPV remains a considerable societal ill and a formidable challenge to professionals, educators, and researchers; this overview of theoretical frames can improve service delivery and inform new and expanded avenues for research.

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Codependency in the Relations of Couples of Imprisoned Women

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Abstract: Female criminal behavior has sparked the interest of many researchers who, from different perspectives, have tried to identify what are the factors that lead them to commit a crime. Studies indicate that female affective bonds change into a potentiator of crime behavior and/or withdrawal of it. The objective of this study was to find out if the couple's bonds (previous or during the prison) were codependent, and to analyze the possible relation between the latter and female crime. This qualitative study used mixed tools in a sample of 27 women in the Bucaramanga prison (Colombia). The I-CO instrument was applied analyzing the four codependency factors: (1) denial mechanisms; (2) incomplete identity development; (3) emotional repression and (4) rescue orientation. The qualitative data obtained through the in-depth interview and focus groups were also analyzed, showing mainly three emerging categories: (1) I did it for him; (2) Although he doesn't love me; and (3) I preferred to remain silent. The results suggested the difficulty of leaving violent relationships and the possible interaction between codependency, violent partner relationships and female crime. This research raises the need to strengthen the empowerment of women inside and outside the prison.

Keywords: women; codependency; gender violence; crime; prison

1. Introduction

Recent studies point to the increase in women in prison and multiple socio-affective, economic, historical and cultural factors that influence the prevalence of female crime. Several investigations on imprisoned women have demonstrated interesting results based on the socio-historical situation of each region, highlighting the importance of the context in understanding the problem (Giacomello 2013; Wolff and de Moraes 2010; Palma 2011; Salazar 2007). Thus, the processes of criminalization of women are historically and contextually situated (Torres 2008; Almeda 2002), and correspond to the type of relationships that define and re-construct them as social subjects.

Aristizábal and Cubells (2019) argue that women in prison were already imprisoned before entering prison as victims of gender violence, which is generally promoted by their partner (also known as domestic violence). The women arrive in jail escaping from a violent relationship, and in this action of escape they find crime as their only alternative. Therefore, it is considered that there is a clear relationship between being a "victim" and being a "criminal"; a victim of domestic violence and a criminal as the penal system attributes to those who carry out actions contrary to what is established by law and that implies the fulfillment of penalties or sanctions based on the seriousness of the fault in accordance with what is established by the justice system.

For this study, domestic violence is defined as:

"A systematic pattern of abusive behaviors, occurring over a period of time, that may become more frequent and severe and are done for the purpose of control, domination, and/or coercion. Such behaviors may include verbal abuse and threats; physical, psychological and sexual abuse; and destruction of property and pets. The batterer frequently accomplishes the abuses in an

environment of his own creation that ultimately traps the victim in a state of fear, insolation, deprivation, and confusion. Domestic violence episodes are not random acts of violence of incidents of mere loss of temper. Rather, such episodes are part of a complex, continuing pattern of behaviour, of which the violence is but one dynamic" (Shornstein 1997, p. 1)

Other studies carried out with women who have not been in prison indicate that gender violence is strongly related to emotional dependence (Aiquipa 2015; Moreno and Osorio 2013; Echeburúa et al. 2002). De Miguel Calvo (2012, 2016), Chamberlen (2017) and Lagarde (1990), have analyzed the lifestyles of women in prison and have denoted addictions and emotional dependence as factors that describe them.

Aristizábal (2017) also relates the power of affective bonds to mobilize women's behavior towards crime and/or withdrawal; among them, the links with the couple are prioritized as the relationship that has the greatest influence in the commission of the crime. As the author mentions, affective bonds refer to any process of relationship given between subjects and/or social objects, marked by an emotional charge that attributes its own meanings and that mobilizes the action of the parts (or one of the parts) that relate to each other (Aristizábal 2017). These could also be determined as a space available for gender violence, which can be considered as a type of psychosocial prison in which women find themselves before being captured.

Such a psychosocial prison may correspond to emotional dependency, defined by Momeñe et al. (2017) as a need for continuous affection and continuous and excessive contact with the partner, and that usually the women had greater emotion regulation difficulties with than men. Likewise, other studies indicate that the satisfaction of the relationship of the couple is significantly explained by their emotional dependency, perceptions of interpersonal rejection and unrealistic relationship expectations (Kemer et al. 2016), that could be reflect the limitations of a psychosocial prison.

Some authors make a difference between emotional dependency and codependency. Noriega and Ramos (2002) affirm that codependency is a disorder in the area of interpersonal relationships (more often in the couple) that refers to a psychological problem that occurs repetitively in almost everyone who lives with an addicted person (any type of addiction that is usually attributed to alcoholism). Freixa (2000) point out that codependency occurs through a process that progressively increases in parallel to the couple's addiction problem, which fluctuates between stable episodes and despair in the face of the disability of not achieving change in their relationship. Thus, codependent relationships are characterized by self-perceptions, attitudes and unhealthy behaviors that, instead of reducing problems, increase them. Codependent people generally come from dysfunctional families or with some addiction behavior, and therefore in the relationship with their partner they tend to allow such patterns (Woititz 1993).

Other studies denote that codependency is a syndrome that encompasses different symptoms and personality traits, in which the individual is affected by having been or by being immersed in a family environment with a long history of addictions (alcohol, drugs, among others), or in stressful environments (Potter-Efron and Potter-Efron 1989). This is related to what was mentioned by Aristizábal and Cubells (2017), referring to the fact that women with criminal histories behavior have histories of mistreatment and/or abuse that have developed throughout their lives and many are involved in addictions that have been gestated from childhood. In this way, it can be said that a person is codependent because they maintain a relationship with a partner who abuses them, violates them in some way or exploits them. Codependent people structure their lives around subjects with some type of addiction, establishing a strong commitment, despite the failures and multiple frustrations that this relationship causes them (Wright and Wright 1991). According to Noriega and Ramos (2002), codependency occurs more frequently in women than in men, this could be considered as a strategy for coping with the crisis, stressful environments and/or situations that make them vulnerable to threat. In the case of men, according to Roehling et al. (1996), conduct disorders turn out to be the coping strategy in the face of their own crises.

So far, there is no known study that has analyzed the codependency in intimate relationships in imprisoned women in depth, much less that has determined whether it establishes any type of

relationship with criminal activity. Inviting imprisoned women to dialogue on the topic of discussion can become a narrative strategy that empowers them, as it leads them to think more deeply about their relationships with men and how that led to their imprisonment, contributing to the withdrawal and the assumption of gender equality from their own practices. Therefore, it is necessary to identify whether or not there is a relationship between female crime and codependency in couple relationships and to analyze the forms of production and reproduction of these relationships.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study uses qualitative and quantitative instruments such as the in-depth interview, the focus groups and the psychological test ICOD Test MP92-100 (Noriega 2011), respectively. It is framed within the socio-constructionist (Ibáñez and Jiménez 2001) and gender (Harding 2004; Pujal 2005) perspectives.

2.1. Sample

Intentional sample made up of 27 internal women in the Women's Prison of Bucaramanga (Colombia), who voluntarily decided to participate in this study and have been part of the "BONDINGS" program since 2018 (BONDINGS—Affective Bonds NGO 2020). It was essential that all the participants reported having a partner before and/or during the process of entering the prison. Women's personal data are reserved and, therefore, the identification code created for this study is used: from S-1 to S-27 (women registered on lines 1 to 27 in the database).

2.2. Procedure

(1) The information from this study was shared with all the women invited to participate and the voluntary decision was registered by signing the informed consent. (2) The ICOD emotional codependency instrument was applied and the four codependency factors in women deprived of liberty were analyzed. (3) In-depth interviews were carried out through the narrative design of the topic and focus groups, emphasizing the exploration of the couple's bond. (4) The data were analyzed to find out the forms of production and reproduction of codependency and, from their own discourses, contribute to the empowerment of women in the reduction of violence and thus gender inequality. (5) The participants will know the results of this study once the entry to prison is made possible again, which has been stopped due to preventive care of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research process began in 2019.

2.3. Instruments

ICOD MP92-100 test (Noriega 2011), in-depth interviews and focus groups. For the application of the test, the intention of evaluating the couple's relationships before and/or during admission to prison was specified.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data collected through the ICOD MP92-100 were descriptive and analyzed through the SPSS software (IBM SPSS Statistics 27—Bucaramanga, Colombia). For the data resulting from the interviews and the focus groups, the analysis of the discourse was carried out through the Atlas.Ti software (The Qualitative Data Analysis 8—Bucaramanga, Colombia). The interviews were transcribed through Scribe Transcription Software, following the criteria of Jefferson (2004).

3. Results and Discussion

Initially, the results of the emotional codependency test (ICOD MP92-100) were analyzed, finding that 88.9% of the participating women presented emotional codependency with the couples they had before and/or during prison admission, with a score higher than 32 according to the descriptive

analysis parameters. The test analyzed the four conceptual dimensions of codependency proposed by Noriega (2011): Factor 1. Denial mechanisms; Factor 2. Incomplete development of identity; Factor 3. Emotional repression and Factor 4. Rescue orientation towards others.

The instrument applied in the Bucaramanga Women's Prison yielded very approximate values in each of the factors; however, 33.33% of the sample obtained the highest score in factor 4: rescue orientation, where the woman tries to control her environment seeking to solve problems of others; with attitudes of perfectionism, excessive work and exaggerated responsibility. This confirms what has been exposed by different authors, who point out that there are women who assume a traditional gender role, mainly associated with caring for others (Lagarde 1990; Lamas 1996).

Subsequently, 25.93% of the participants obtained a high score in factor 2: incomplete development of identity. According to Noriega (2011), this factor corresponds to a child development interrupted by dysfunctional situations, where women since childhood take a role of early responsibility, while reversing the role of father or mother with their own parents and being trapped in a unresolved symbiosis with them, waiting one day to meet their own needs for support, care and protection. Therefore, the woman with an incomplete identity development lives in order to meet the needs of others as a way to compensate for her own feelings of fear and insecurity and it is generally difficult for her to make decisions because internally she feels incomplete.

In the third instance, factor 3 was found: emotional repression, with a 22.22% frequency in the sample. Here, women do not usually express their displeasure and/or emotions because they fear causing problems and losing acceptance of others, trying to be understanding and accommodating to everyone, living in fear that something terrible may happen. Finally, factor 1 appears: denial mechanism with a 18.52% occurrence. This factor manifests itself as a defense mechanism that seeks to avoid experiencing a reality that is difficult to face. It manifests itself with self-deception and justifications, through which the woman disqualifies her thoughts and emotions, while avoiding contact with other people who may confront her with her reality. It is generally made visible by tolerating mistreatment of the couple, avoiding contact with other people so as not to listen to their opinions, confusion when trying to accept what they do not really accept, justifying their partner's faults and minimizing problems with their partner so as not to have to solve it.

The quantitative data presented above were closely related to the qualitative data analyzed through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The speeches of the participating women clearly show the social construction of what it means to "be a woman" in a patriarchal society that links her to caring for others; care that is often permeated with violence. Most of the women tried to leave their violent partners and they did not succeed until they got to prison; once there, many men walked away from them and other women still continue with this type of relationship that from prison becomes ideal because the daily violence is hidden and the expectation is generated that when they leave "everything will change", and even "it will be better than before". Below are some emerging categories that confirm the conceptual factors of codependency and that, in turn, show a possible connection between codependency and female crime.

3.1. I Did It for Him

Many women repeatedly expressed in their stories the statement: "I did it for him," indicating an attitude of fidelity, rescue and help towards their partner, who expressed how much they needed them, and who perceived themselves as vulnerable subjects. Most of the women were victims of domestic violence, although they did not identify emotional abuse and physical assault as violent actions. Some men were not only aggressive, but also dependent on alcohol, drugs, or gambling. This category is closely related to factors 4 and 2 of codependency: rescue orientation and incomplete identity development.

"He needed me . . . , I knew that if I left him he would not bear it . . . , because he told me [. . .] Everything I did I did for him, for a better future, because I kept hoping that someday he was going to stop drinking, and I saw that he was trying. When we were well he did not

get drunk, but if we had a fight he would leave [. . .] The same thing happened to me with my dad" (S-22, Woman registered on line 22 of the database)

Original version:

"El me necesitaba . . . , yo sabía que si yo lo dejaba él no lo iba a soportar . . . , porque él me lo decía [. . .] Todo lo que hice lo hice por él, por un futuro mejor, porque yo guardaba la esperanza de que algún día iba a dejar de tomar, y yo veía que lo intentaba. Cuando estábamos bien no se emborrachaba, pero si teníamos alguna pelea de una se iba [. . .] Lo mismo me tocó con mi papá" (S-22, Woman registered on line 22 of the database)

"I did everything for him . . . , I fell madly in love . . . [. . .] I blindly trusted him and worried about his things, so that he was well [. . .] He never hit me, but the worst thing he could have done was send me to coordinate the robbery while he stayed directing it from home . . . I did it for him, so that he was well" (S-8, Woman registered on line 8 of the database)

Original version:

"Yo le hacía todo . . . , me enamoré perdidamente . . . [. . .] Yo confiaba ciegamente en él y me preocupaba por sus cosas, porque estuviera bien [. . .] Él nunca me pegó, pero lo peor que me pudo haber hecho fue mandarme a coordinar el robo cuando él se quedaba dirigiendo desde la casa . . . Lo hice por él, para que él estuviera bien" (S-8, Woman registered on line 8 of the database)

Caring for the other turned out to be an explanatory factor of female crime (Aristizábal and Cubells 2017). According to Gilligan (1982), the role of women is framed in the ethics of caring for other people—a responsibility that is socially conferred and for which she is demanded. In other words, it is a woman's desire to meet their partners' needs (through crime) while neglecting their own needs; it is the socially imposed commitment to prioritize the requirements of others over one's own. Based on this responsibility that is founded in a patriarchal society, women face the crossroads of looking after the well-being of the other, although many times they have to go against social, moral and legal norms.

3.2. Although He Doesn't Love Me

Affective dependency is characterized by emotional distress (insecure attachment) and dependency to another person with a low self-esteem and reassurance need (Scantamburlo et al. 2013). This is clearly observed in the stories of several women interviewed, who affirm the need to be with someone even though he does not show them that he loves them. Many allowed the mistreatment as a way of "not enlarging the problem", at the cost of the companionship benefit. This category is closely related to co-dependency factor 1 on denial mechanisms.

"One already gets used to the other person and well . . . finally one resigns oneself to the things that happen as they have to happen . . . In the end we did not touch each other, nor speak, nor look at each other . . . At first I cried a lot, but afterwards I said that it was not worth crying, so I resigned myself [. . .] We continue to live together because I did not want to be alone, and the truth is that I did not see myself alone, I was never alone, ever since I was little there was someone, although if only to make a bulk" (S-10, Woman registered on line 10 of the database)

Original version:

"Uno ya se acostumbra a la otra persona y pues . . . finalmente uno se resigna a que las cosas pasen como tienen que pasar [. . .] Ya a lo último él ni me tocaba, ni me hablaba, ni me miraba . . . Al principio lloré mucho, pero ya después dije que no valía la pena llorar, entonces me resigné [. . .] Seguíamos viviendo juntos como por no estar sola, y pues la verdad yo no me veía sola, es que nunca estuve sola, desde chiquita siempre había alguien, aunque solo sea para hacer bulto" (S-10, Woman registered on line 10 of the database)

As mentioned by Scantamburlo et al. (2013), overprotective and authoritarian parenting and cultural and socio-environmental factors may contribute to the development of a dependent personality. Psychological epigenetic factors, such as early socio-emotional trauma, could *imprint* on neuronal circuits in prefrontal-limbic regions that are essential for emotional behavior. According to the authors, there is a strong relationship between dependent personality, domestic violence, and addictions. Therefore, the restoration of self-esteem and therapeutic strategies focused on autonomy are essential.

> "He spoke to me when he felt like it, and when he didn't, he would not. He never hit me, but sometimes I preferred to be hit rather than ignored. He would sit in front of the television and pretend nothing else existed" (S-19, Woman registered on line 19 of the database)

> Original version:

> "Él me hablaba cuando se le daba la gana, y cuando no, no. Él nunca me llegó a pegar, pero a veces prefería que me pegara a que me ignorara. Él se sentaba frente al televisor y hacía como si nada más existiera" (S-19, Woman registered on line 19 of the database)

As evidenced in the stories, the women interviewed were being affected by gender violence and affective dependency. Recognizing that "gender violence is an issue that shows patriarchal practices in all its forms of manifestation" (Madera-Hernández and Herrera-López 2010, p. 88), it is assumed that couple relationships are the direct sample of such manifestations of violence. This type of violence, sometimes referred to as marital violence, domestic violence, violence by intimate partner, etc., affects not only women, but their different fields of action, such as family, work, and social (Ocampo and Amar 2011), and therefore it is not a problem that corresponds to singular situations, but a social one, and with multiple factors that interact with each other until inducing crime. These factors are closely related to family life, such as marital violence, physical punishment and affection received from parents, where the interests and/or expectations that bind them to the couple strengthen and maintain these power relationships (González and Santana 2001).

Intimate partner violence is a social problem that affects a large number of women (many without recognizing it as acts of violence), where a higher prevalence of psychological violence rather than physical and sexual violence is observed, and where in many cases they occur simultaneously (Martínez 2003). According to Cantera and Blanch (2010), one cannot ignore the great influence exerted by social stereotypes on gender (male provider, female caregiver), as promoters of intimate partner violence, given in a patriarchal society that demarcates the norms of action expected of the couple; in other words, women are legitimized to obey and follow the social demands that bind them to their partner in a condition of dependency. In this patriarchal order, norm and justice have been built from the analysis of a male subject that often suppresses the female subject in any of its forms of expression (Almeda 2017).

Estimating the relationship between codependency and female crime implies adding the category of gender violence to the duo. Palma states that, socially, it has been established that women commit crimes that are more related to passive and non-aggressive acts, since they are expected to be the promoters of social or communal good and not, on the contrary, those that affect this security (Palma 2011). This connection of women to the category of the fragile, the careful, and the maternal leads them to be judged by society with moral and exclusive restrictions that are termed as bad, dangerous and harmful. In this line, we could not see the unequal particularities between men and women, without looking at the context in which they are built, since it is in that same context that they change, transform, negotiate and realize the plurality of practices of daily life (Lamas 2003). According to this study, couple relationships are the socio-affective space in which the greatest violent practices take place.

Such violent practices are pronounced in codependent relationships that strengthen over time as a couple's addiction problem also increases; a fact that many times is not recognized by the affected subject. This relationship fluctuates between stable episodes and despair in the face of the disability of not achieving change in their relationship (Noriega and Ramos 2002; Freixa 2000). In this way, codependency is a multicausal problem (as it is spoken of crime), that appears and reproduces in

power relations that make women vulnerable. This category is visible in women in prison, which also turns out to be a gender issue. In other words, gender is a discursive effect, a result of a set of identity regulatory practices that can face problems due to codependent relationships, which in turn limit them and often lead down wrong paths such as crime (as is the case of the participants in this study).

3.3. I Preferred to Remain Silent

This category is closely related to codependency factor 3: emotional repression. Some women were understanding and accommodating to their partners, did not express their thoughts and emotions out of fear of being rejected or losing control of themselves, or even losing the relationship. As Momeñe et al. (2017) affirm, psychological abuse and difficulties in regulating emotions are predictors of emotional dependence.

> "Sometimes I kept quiet to avoid problems ... because I knew that if I started talking I would despair and if I didn't end up crying like crazy, then I did other crazy things ... and he despairs of seeing me cry exasperates him ... " (S-14, Woman registered on line 14 of the database)

> Original version:

> "Yo a veces me quedaba callada para evitar problemas ... pues yo sabía que si yo comenzaba a hablar me iba a desesperar y si no terminaba llorando como una loca, entonces hacía otras locuras ... y a él le desespera verme llorar ... " (S-14, Woman registered on line 14 of the database)

Past studies have looked at the relationship between emotional dependency, the occurrence and sustainability of abuse and the low probability that a victimized person will terminate a relationship. Individuals with Dependent Personality Disorder or with dependent characteristics present a higher risk of becoming abusive (both physically and mentally) as well as becoming a victim of abuse (both physically and mentally), as in the S-14 interviewee "then did other crazy things", as well as becoming victims of abuse "Sometimes I kept quiet to avoid problems" (Leemans and Loas 2016). Some interviewed women were aware of their emotional dependence, naturalized it and generalized it "that happens to all of us"—reasons that perhaps explain the difficulty in walking away from these violent relationships. Porto and Bucher-Maluschke (2012) identified economic and emotional dependencies as the main determinants of the permanence of some women in violent situations, in addition to the secondary gains they could obtain from these relationships.

In conclusion, we are faced with a great social problem: codependent relationships. The latter, mediated by gender violence, can stimulate escape behaviors such as crime in women. Trying to get out of the psychosocial prison from a violent and dependent relationship, they arrive at the physical prison. It is also necessary to know that emotional dependency is one of the four most common causes of femicide: (1) badly managed male aggressivity; (2) slavery in human relationships; (3) various forms of jealousy; and (4) emotional dependency (Pasini 2016), which alerts the prioritization of this problematic nucleus on public programs.

Likewise, psychological and emotional dependence is associated with addiction to tobacco and/or other elements (Liaquat et al. 2016), which represents a new challenge for clinical research regarding its management. Some interviewed women were addicted to some psychoactive substance. A strong belief exists among addiction treatment specialists that the primary reason addicts remain addicted is less about pleasure-seeking and more about their need to escape and dissociate from the pain of his or her (often trauma-based) emotional isolation. In short, all human beings deeply crave intimate, dependable, empathetic relationships. Addicts, however, have learned, typically through traumatic experience, that others cannot be trusted to reliably meet their need for intimate connection. Essentially, they learn to fear emotional vulnerability, and they therefore distance themselves from other people, turning instead to addictive substances and/or behaviors as a way to "not feel" their unmet emotional dependency needs. As such, a primary part of treating addicts, regardless of the nature of their addiction, is helping them develop healthy and supportive emotional bonds (Weiss 2016).

In addition, some of the women participating in this study showed characteristics of the "Fortunata syndrome" (Mairal 2015), repeatedly establishing affective relationships with married men. Some behaviors and attitudes were identified such as emotional dependence and strong and lasting loyalty to the man, ambivalence feelings towards the official partner (resentment), questioning the validity of the man's union with the other woman and repeated one's fantasies that their circumstances would change and they would end up being together.

Finally, in accordance with what was exposed by Petruccelli et al. (2014), it can be said that sociocultural and demographic variables, together with the previous structuring of attachment styles, help to determine the scope, frequency and intensity of the demands made on the couple, as well as to feed fears of loss, abandonment or betrayal (Petruccelli et al. 2014), which gives us a clear picture for a deep understanding of codependent relationships, answering the question: why do some women not leave violent relationships? There is an answer.

Based on all the above, it could be said that: (1) the effects of domestic violence can be used by perpetrators to coerce women to commit crimes; (2) The effects of codependency can lead women to make active decisions in participating in crime to meet the needs of their partners; (3) There is a strong relationship between the effects of domestic violence and the effects of codependency that could be studied in depth in subsequent studies: post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, shame, social isolation, feelings of mistrust and hostility, suicide attempts, among others; (4) Domestic violence and codependency could be considered as psychosocial prisons that restrict freedom of expression and decision for those who assume them; (5) The women participating in this study recognized that they were manipulated to participate in crime, but that at the time they were not aware of it. In other words, none of them felt forced to commit the crime, only until they got to prison; a situation that signals an alert in all women who are being victims of domestic violence and have developed a codependent relationship. It is clear that women who comply with these last two factors are vulnerable to committing a crime and/or any other action that threatens their integrity and that of others. It is not necessary to go to prison to take action on the matter.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study clearly point to the profile of emotionally codependent women to their partners; codependency that is described as a type of prison that goes beyond physical prison. Many of the women interviewed were incarcerated before entering prison, suppressing themselves in order to live through their partners. Some women left the violent relationship when they were captured, others have persisted, so a new question arises: what is the difference between those who decided to break the violent relationship and those who decided to continue? It is clear that breaking the violent relationship does not mean that they have closed the cycle of emotional dependency, so who really finished the circle of dependency? Some women closed the circle of dependency a long side the process of this study, others did so from the consolidation of new practices of subjectivation that led them to identify themselves as valuable, autonomous people and with the agency to make adjustments and changes for their good and the common good.

This study revealed the strong relationship that exists between emotional codependency and violent relationships. People who are emotionally dependent on other people (who in turn have another type of dependency) establish a difficult cycle to break, because they are generating certain practices that place the responsibility of their previous dependency on the couple, that is, specifically certain guilt over their own vulnerability, and therefore they demanded the couple's rescue. In this relationship of emotional codependency, arguments are produced that erroneously justify the actions of the other and their own, to the point that it becomes difficult to modify them or look for other options. Codependency is a form of violence in that it limits the freedom of choice.

In this study, it is estimated that one of the ways to break the argument that justifies codependency is through another argument that turns out to be more convincing than the first. It is not enough that it is a valid and justifiable argument for other people if it lacks validity for oneself. From here, it is clearly

seen how subjective violence is, although in itself it has such objective characteristics through which it can be determined whether or not someone is a victim of violence. Because the way of perceiving violence is subjective, the way out of a violent relationship is also very subjective. It is increasingly complex to identify a unique pattern that indicates the level of vulnerability of a woman to fall into a violent relationship and the level of empowerment to leave it.

Despite subjective limitations to objectify knowledge, this study provided valuable data on the possible ways out to leave a violent relationship. It is clear that knowing this route was not the main objective of this study, but when observing what was happening with women in the process, and the impact that the activities had on them, in the visibility of codependency, the identification of gender violence and finally the voluntary decision to break the violent circle allowed to us identify a series of steps that, although they had unique aspects, manifested themselves in several of them.

In the first instance, the identification of the primary codependency factor that is established in a relationship in a repetitive way is necessary. This study made it many times easier to identify if the couple has a dependency and if they have dependent behaviors towards the couple, to identify whether or not they are victims of gender violence. Many interviewed women indicate that they have never had any type of violence, but that they have generated emotional dependencies of men with dependence on alcohol, gambling, sex, among others (reviewing their past–present).

Once the level of codependency is identified, the harmful effects on their life and the lives of their close ones should be reviewed concerning their mental health and their quality of life. At this point, women were constructing their own arguments about how profitable it was to sustain this codependent relationship in relation to cost-benefit (reviewing their present). Some women did not want to continue on the following topics for discussion, some stayed in the review of their past and a bit of the present, but they gave up on the process. Some of them expressed that they did not want to talk about their injuries; in confinement they preferred to think about the ideal of a romantic relationship, because they did not want to be alone. It is here where the metaphor of psychically imprisoned women is visible: women transit from one jail to another—from the jail of dependency to the jail of fear of loneliness among many others.

Third, they were allowed to identify the repercussions in the future if they continued in this type of relationship (reviewing their future). Finally, those who continued the process reached the last stage of this discussion strategy: painful but decisive decisions. Each participant was led to reflect on possible decisions that approach the woman they want to be and not the one others compel or want to see. This process cannot stop here; many of these women revealed the presence of other bonds that motivated their own agency.

Based on the above, it is necessary to continue deepening the study of affective bonds, their impact, and the practices that link the consolidation of healthy, liberating, empowering and transforming bonds, as well as in the personal agency strategies that usually occur from the modifications in the perception of life and the environment. It seems that recent generations build prisons that provide them with some fake security; there are women fearful of resistance, of defiance, of loneliness, with the uncertainty of tomorrow, weak in the face of threat and fragile in the face of failure. However, just as there are these types of women, there are also women who are characterized by having healthy, non-violent, non-dependent relationships, women who are not afraid of suffering, who work tirelessly for their present and future, who do not stop at defeat but assume that this could be a chance for success, so as not to continue building bars of psychic prisons that could only be demolished with arguments based on the truth of themselves, a truth that perceives us all as beings equally worthy of love.

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Mothers as Victims of Intimate Partner Violence: The Decision to Leave or Stay and Resilience-Oriented Intervention

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Abstract: This paper presents a qualitative study to understand the reasons for leaving or staying in an abusive relationship and how this informs planning for psychosocial interventions with victims. We present a study of 15 Portuguese women with children who were victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). The sample consisted of women, helped by a Victim Support Office, who volunteered to participate in a semi-structured interview and whose narrative responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The results, organized into two broad categories, reveal that the reasons for staying in the abusive relationship are essentially related to extrinsic factors (e.g., children, the aggressor, society), which reinforces myths (e.g., marriage is for life) and makes it difficult to break the cycle of violence. However, the decision to leave the abusive relationship is also based on the same factors which, when reconceptualized and empowered, contribute to the intrinsic recognition of the problem and the decision-making process. We find that the resilience portfolio model, which focuses on three major factors (self-regulation, interpersonal forces, and construction of meaning), favors the identification of protective factors that can guide interventions for individuals facing situations of adversity such as IPV.

Keywords: women; mother; victims; intimate partner violence (IPV); domestic violence; leave or stay

1. Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is one of the most frequent types of domestic violence. IPV is characterized by various forms of abusive (physical, psychological, sexual), dominance and control behaviors perpetrated by one partner over the other in the context of an intimate relationship (Burgess et al. 2010). IPV exists in all socioeconomic, religious, and cultural contexts/groups, regardless of sexual orientation, age, or sex, although an unequal gender distribution is recognized (Burgess 2017); gender assumptions are culturally legitimated and influence individual and social discourses on risk as well as informing the policies and practices of risk assessment (Walklate 2018).

Research on IPV has developed a recognition of the factors and processes that contribute to the key decision by victims of abusive relationships of whether to stay or leave their partner (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Barrios et al. 2020). This issue is particularly important in models and intervention strategies aimed at the recovery of the victim of violence (Peterson 2020) and also contributes to the general health and well-being of individuals after experiencing violence (Hamby et al. 2017).

The decision to leave an abusive relationship is very difficult for victims to make, because they must consider their own safety as well as the safety of their children (Jones and Vetere 2017; Peterson 2020; Stephens 1999). The leaving process is complex and contingent upon numerous contexts, such as individual factors (e.g., clinical condition of the victim), interpersonal factors (e.g., support of their family, the needs and safety of their children, the severity of IPV), and community or sociocultural factors (e.g., the existence of victim support services, cultural beliefs about gender roles, coercive control, religious tradition) (Barrios et al. 2020; Domenech del Rio and Valle 2019; Estrellado and Loh 2019; Jones et al. 2017; Sears 2018; Wilhelm and Tonet 2007). The process of leaving the abusive relationship is influenced by a series of micro and macro variables that affect each individual. The process is more abrupt for some victims than for others. The decision may arise in different stages depending on the weighting that different aspects contribute to the decision to leave (Enander and Holmberg 2008; Khaw and Hardesty 2013). Some victims face great psychological difficulties during the decision-making process to leave and/or after leaving the abusive relationship, and their condition may worsen over time (Anderson and Saunders 2003). Therefore, it is important to know the factors that can affect the decision to leave, as well as the predictors of victim well-being, so that when there is a request for help, the planning for an intervention can consider various factors that can help the victim face adversity, particularly their resources and strengths. We note that some studies in this area recognize the importance of such factors, but do not present them within a model or go on to discuss how they can inform interventions with victims of IPV. This work intends to fill that gap.

This article presents an empirical qualitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional study, which observed the experience of victims of IPV who are mothers. Based on the narratives of victims, the research identifies the main factors underlying victims' decisions to leave abusive relationships. We find that these factors are also fundamental for consideration in the victim support process. After a brief literature review on the issue of leaving an abusive relationship, we focus on the elements of The Resilience Portfolio Model (Grych et al. 2015) to reflect on the process of psychosocial support to victims of IPV. Based on victims' experiences, and through the use of a qualitative and participatory (grounded) research approach, we move toward theory. Although not an exhaustive consideration, we attempt to underline the importance of psychosocial intervention in this area.

2. Reasons for Leaving the Abusive Intimate Relationship

There are many theoretical contributions to the understanding of the process of abandoning an abusive intimate relationship (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Barrios et al. 2020): from Freudian explanation, based on conceptions of relational masochism for not leaving the abusive relationship (Snell et al. 1964; Young and Gerson 1991) and traumatic bonding theory (Dutton and Painter 1993); through critical approaches from feminism or social psychology that emphasize the role of gender in the understanding of violence against women (Andrade 2018; Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007; Wuest and Merrit-Gray 2001); up to the current debate on violence as an attack on human rights (McLeod et al. 2020; Otto 2019). Given that no single theory has been able to predict which reasons weigh most heavily on the decision to leave an abusive relationship, some empirical studies, mainly quantitative, have tried to isolate variables that have some explanatory power (Domenech del Rio and Valle 2019; Rhodes and McKenzie 1998). Research on leaving abusive relationships identifies various personal, interpersonal, and societal factors that are classified in various ways in different studies (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Baly 2010; Gelles 1976; Jones and Vetere 2017; Khaw and Hardesty 2013).

For Gelles (1976) three important factors must be observed: (i) the severity of violence (the less severe, the greater the tendency to stay in the relationship); (ii) history of childhood abuse (such a victim is more likely to remain in the relationship); (iii) material resources of the victim (the fewer resources, the more likely they are to stay). Rhodes and McKenzie (1998), reviewing three decades of studies, concluded that although some of these factors may be important in the decision to leave, the results are contradictory or unclear and that other variables can be considered, for example, individual factors

(e.g., personality characteristics, self-esteem, psychological effects of the abuse). However, many of the studies reviewed by these authors were mainly concerned with recognizing what was wrong with the victims, rather than focusing on the behaviors and attitudes that can favor the leaving process. We corroborate the opinion of Rhodes and McKenzie (1998) when they conclude that there was a tendency to look for a theory that fits all victims and not to try to understand their inner worlds and patterns of behavior in their relationships. Likewise, we support the position that interventions should be tailored to fit each case, attending to the individual experience of each victim of IPV, as advocated by other studies (Khaw and Hardesty 2013).

Anderson and Saunders (2003) mention two broad categories of predictors for leaving an abusive relationship: material resources (e.g., employment and income) and social–psychological factors (e.g., history of childhood abuse). Khaw and Hardesty (2013) theorize that sociocultural factors intersect and interact with individual factors (e.g., informal social support), and the interplay of these elements creates unique circumstances affecting the victim's access to formal support resources (e.g., the police) and the strategies they choose to engage in leaving. We prefer to refer to the existence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors to the victim if we consider the conceptual classification of locus of control (internal vs. external) (Rotter 1966) that can determine decision-making.

Baly (2010) underlines the importance of analyzing the victim's narratives. Through a qualitative study with women who had abandoned abusive relationships, she concluded that meaning-making about the abusive situation was influenced by social and cultural discourses in different ways: some constructions reduced the victim's ability to deal with the situation, while other discourses encouraged a self-construction of personal strength to leave the abusive situation.

We need to highlight that the decision to leave is the result of a process that may include several phases, during which the victim learns how to face the adverse situation of IPV. The process is multidimensional and variable: some victims first prepare a cognitive and emotional leaving (with primary recognition, resistance, and risk management) before the physical leaving (already aware of their own needs) (Anderson and Saunders 2003), while others may experience a faster cut of the abusive relationship. Preparation is more than just a step within the larger process of leaving that must be actively planned (Bermea et al. 2020). Closer to the decision to leave, some factors can be decisive (e.g., the existence of family or friends support) and even after leaving the relationship, other factors continue to contribute (e.g., education of children), which may reinforce the decision to leave or may compromise it, resulting in a reversal of the decision. For example, motherhood can be a source of empowerment, which helps victims care for their children and survive abusive relationships, or a source of pressure to leave abusive situations (Jones and Vetere 2017; Sani et al. 2020; Zink et al. 2003). The dissonance between wanting the best for their children and fearing the involvement of child protection services hinders decision-making by victims of IPV (Sani and Carvalho 2018; Zink et al. 2003) and thus should be considered in planning for supportive interventions.

After leaving an abusive relationship the victim needs practical assistance (Anderson and Saunders 2003). For example, how will the victim ensure their psychological well-being in the post-separation period? This is a question that professionals who are in the line of support to the victim necessarily ask, even before the abusive intimate relationship ends. This reinforces the idea that leaving an abusive relationship is a process that begins before a decision is made and does not end after the decision to leave. Therefore, various intrinsic (e.g., meaning-making, self-regulatory) or extrinsic forces (e.g., social support, material resources) on the victim need to be identified and worked on to protect against negative psychological outcomes. Sometimes the same factors that are identified as predictors of leaving are variables that require additional work to enhance an effective support intervention for victims of IPV (e.g., the existence of young children, recognition of informal social support).

Finally, based on the results of our study and considering the implications of these for the intervention process to support victims of violence, we will defend the adoption of a positive approach

centered on the search for the individual's strengths, which can also be found in a model that we will present below.

3. Intervention with IPV Victims: Three Components for Resilience

Research on victims has enabled important developments to be achieved on interventions to violence and crime (Hamby et al. 2017; Sani and Caridade 2016, 2018). In this context, a paradigm shift has been advocated that allows a better understanding of violence, adopts an integrated approach to the phenomenon, takes into account the risk factors (static and dynamic), and also considers the mechanisms that underlie violence and victimization (Ahmadabadi et al. 2018). Accordingly, intervention processes must focus on the identification and promotion of the strengths or skills evidenced by individual victims (Hamby et al. 2017).

In the following, we briefly present The Resilience Portfolio Model (Grych et al. 2015), a conceptual approach that aims to identify the poly-strengths or protective factors of the person that can contribute to their health and well-being after exposure to stressful situations. According to the model, there are three major strengths associated with well-being: self-regulation (ability to sustain motivation and overcome obstacles while striving toward a goal); interpersonal forces (social support); and meaning-making (capacity to find meaning in difficulty). The gathering of forces from these three functional domains can promote the necessary resilience for the prevention of violence and the development of well-being, as demonstrated in some studies (e.g., Banyard et al. 2016; Taylor et al. 2016).

In this model (Grych et al. 2015), sometimes the factors that promote a person's resilience are simply the reverse of the risk factors (e.g., the non-existence vs. existence of a recognized support system); however, an effort is needed to search for the multi-forces that may be more implicit. Additionally, a more positive view of the goal of the intervention process is that it would be defined not by the absence of pathology, but by reaching levels of well-being and health. In the domain of intervention with victims of violence and specifically the decision of staying in or leaving abusive relationships, this model has particular importance when assuming decision-making as a process in which the identification and mobilization of protective factors contribute to the victim's well-being (subjective evaluations of satisfaction).

Following the tradition of research supported by qualitative approaches that underline the importance of understanding individuals' experiential reality, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge of factors associated with leaving an abusive relationship, and on this basis we reflect on interventions in support of the victim of IPV.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The sample was constituted through intentional sampling, respecting ethical and deontological principles, and utilizing the following inclusion/exclusion criteria: (i) being a user in a follow-up session at the support entity collaborating in this study; (ii) being female; (iii) being a mother; (iv) being over the age of 18; (v) having direct experience of domestic violence by an intimate partner in a heterosexual relationship; (vi) having mental functional autonomy (vii) not being at risk of violence and/or being physically or emotionally fragile; (viii) not showing cognitive limitations that make it impossible to understand the study; (ix) not revealing any dissonance, embarrassment, displeasure, or any kind of pressure that interferes with free and informed consent.

The sample size was defined through a theoretical saturation criterion (Fontanella et al. 2008), which led to the voluntary participation of 15 Portuguese mothers (cf. Table 1) that were victims of IPV in a heterosexual relationship and who decided to leave—on their own initiative—the abusive relationship and who also requested/received support from the Victim Support Office (VSO).

The women were aged between 29 and 71 years old (M = 47.9; SD = 12.0) and almost half (46.7%) had a basic level of education. The sample is heterogeneous, covering several educational levels and types of marital status (five married, five divorced, and four single women and one widowed woman).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of the sample (N = 15).

Participant	Age	Educational Level	Current Marital Status	Prior Relationship
P1	61	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Divorced/Separated	Marriage
P2	59	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Widow	Marriage
P3	36	2nd cycle (5th–6th)	Single	Unmarried union
P4	46	2nd cycle (5th–6th)	Divorced/Separated	Marriage
P5	63	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Married/Unmarried union	Marriage
P6	32	Secondary (10th–12th)	Married/Unmarried union	Unmarried union
P7	50	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Divorced/Separated	Marriage
P8	41	Bachelor's Degree	Married/Unmarried union	Marriage
P9	29	Secondary (10th–12th)	Single	Unmarried union
P10	51	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Married/Unmarried union	Marriage
P11	50	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Married/Unmarried union	Marriage
P12	39	Secondary (10th–12th)	Single	Unmarried union
P13	41	2nd cycle (5th–6th)	Divorced/Separated	Marriage
P14	49	3rd cycle (7th–9th)	Divorced/Separated	Marriage
P15	71	1st cycle (1st–4th)	Single	Dating

4.2. Measures

For data collection we used (i) a sociodemographic questionnaire to collect personal data and (ii) a semi-structured interview script, constructed after a literature review and professional consultation in the area. The script used in data collection had nine questions and is part of a broader research effort that is guided by two general objectives: (i) to understand how women victims of domestic violence conceive their role as mothers and their parenting skills (e.g., how might violence have affected parental function?) and (ii) to understand why these mothers decided to leave or stay in the abusive relationship (e.g., what led you to leave (or not) the relationship?). In this article, we focus on this second objective and explain the reasons why these mothers and victims left the abusive relationship and sought help from a non-governmental organization that supports victims of domestic violence.

4.3. Procedures

To begin, we requested formal authorization from the VSO to contact users of the institution who expressed interest in participating in the research. In parallel, the research project was submitted to the University's Ethics Committee for advice and recommendations.

After collecting all authorizations, we began the study following the recommended ethical and deontological principles. All data and information collected during the investigation were stored on a computer within the VSO, accessible only by a code provided to the researchers. The interviews were conducted in the presence of a VSO psychologist during their planned appointments, with data collection limited to the selected instruments. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, its procedures and also relevant issues of anonymity and data confidentiality; following this, they signed the informed consent. Interviews lasted approximately 30 min and were audio-recorded.

The data treatment and analysis procedure was predominantly qualitative. Data from the interviews were fully transcribed and then subject to qualitative analysis, giving rise to the categories and subcategories of analysis. To this end, we used an interpretive and inductive method of data treatment, based on the strategies of grounded theory (Charmaz and Henwood 2017), according to which the categories emerge from the subjects' narratives, their experiences, and the meanings constructed. Thus, taking a "sentence" as a unit of analysis, we proceeded to categorize it according to the semantic records. To ensure the reliability of the results, steps were taken: (i) saturated coding of all the data collected through the analysis was carried out independently by two researchers (the field researcher and an experienced supervisor); (ii) joint dual analysis was performed, based on

designations emerging from the participants' narratives, via a continuous debate to scrutinize categories; (iii) inclusion of a third researcher to establish an agreement between the two coders in respect of the final designation of emerging categories and subcategories.

Table 2 shows the categories and subcategories that resulted from the qualitative analysis, expressing the reasons why mothers who were victims of violence remained in the relationship and the reasons that make them leave the relationship and ask for help.

Table 2. Sociodemographic characterization of the sample (N = 15).

Categories	Subcategories
A. Reasons for staying in an abusive relationship	A1. Shame A2. Marital commitment A3. Fear for her children A4. Belief in partner's behavior change A5. Economic dependence
B. Reasons to leave the abusive relationship	B1. Family support/approval B2. Intolerance/weariness of situation B3. Protecting children B4. Children's request

5. Results

5.1. Category A. Reasons for Staying in an Abusive Relationship

A1. Shame. Shame appears as one of the reasons that these mothers/victims present for having remained in the abusive marital relationship. They say that revealing to their family or society that they were victims of violence was something that embarrassed them; they chose not to report, or request help in ending, the violent relationship, eventually accepting the consequences of it—"*But at the time it was a shame to be a single mother, so I had to get married*" (P1); "*I didn't go to the hospital and I should have gone because my nose was uneven and I didn't go because it meant showing my face, so my parents would find out*" (P4).

A2. Marital commitment. The idea that marriage should be something that lasts forever has led some of these women to postpone the termination of the abusive relationship for a long time. Divorce was seen as negative and therefore completely rejected, anticipating that, once separated, they would not be able to rebuild their life—"*I myself thought, years ago, that whoever is at home is forever*" (P1); "*I never got divorced ... I don't know ... we had been married for many years, we had a good life*" (P5).

A3. Fear for her children. The psychological pressure to stay in the relationship may arise out of fear that something negative might happen to the children or because of fear of being accused of distancing them from the father, harming them even more—"*I no longer wanted to be with him and I would have ended it all, but he said such bad things, and about our son, and I felt so bad that I went back to him*" (P9); "*I was married to him for 12 years and I let a lot go because of my daughter. I was afraid that my daughter would miss her father*" (P14).

A4. Belief in partner's behavior change. Despite the suffering they went through, some of the victims remained in the abusive marital relationship because they liked their partner and hoped that he would change his aggressive behavior, and, in this way, their relationship would have a new beginning—"*I asked for retirement, with the intention that things would improve. I thought that when I was at home it wouldn't happen that much ... but no, it continued*" (P1); "*I was separated from this person for 3 years, but I came to believe, accept and forgive, and before I met a new person, I thought I would give him another chance*" (P4); "*In my thirst for 'this time everything will be fine', I let things happen*" (P13); "*This started badly, but I liked him so much that I tried to make the relationship work*" (P15).

A5. Economic dependence. For some victims, lack of economic capacity is an obstacle to ending the marital relationship. Factors such as low wages/pensions and lack of employment were identified as important to not being able to support a home with their children on their own without the financial

support of their aggressors, thus subjugating themselves to their abusive relationship—"*I had nowhere to go, I have 300 euros of retirement, it was worthless*" (P5); "*I endured the relationship for a long time because of her, for my daughter, I had no work and nowhere to go*" (P6); "*I was afraid to separate from him, I was afraid to face everything alone, expenses, to support a daughter alone*" (P7); "*So when I get divorced, I have to leave. Now with 200 or so euros, how can I get out of there? I cannot! On top of that, I don't work, I can't get a job when I'm 51*" (P10); "*I don't have the money to leave the house with my daughter and go to a new house*" (P12).

5.2. Category B. Reasons to Leave the Abusive Relationship

B1. Family support/approval. Some women reported that the approval and family support they received were the factors that led them to decide to leave the abusive marital relationship—"*The fact that my parents were here at the time, helped a lot, because I had no family support and, when they knew what was going on, they always helped me*" (P8); "*One day I spoke to my daughter, I explained the situation to her and she agreed with me. She said 'mom, it's better'. I was waiting for her approval to put an end to it*" (P14).

B2. Intolerance/weariness of situation. Other factors that contributed to a victim leaving their abusive marital relationship were a growing intolerance to abuse and a consequent weariness resulting from their continuous experience of aggression by their partner—"*I tried, fought, but one day I woke up and thought I can't be like this. I couldn't be a victim all my life*" (P1); "*Today I get a slap, tomorrow I have a knife stuck in my chest. I don't want to be a victim anymore. My mother was also a victim; I didn't want to have the same life as her*" (P3); "*I got to a point where I couldn't take it anymore (…) until I couldn't stand it*" (P6); "*But I couldn't take it anymore and I ended up leaving. Things were no longer working out between us and the relationship was not healthy. I preferred to leave*" (P9); "*It was just possible to see the person he was with different eyes (…) when I discovered the things he did, my love started to turn into anger and disgust*" (P13).

B3. Protection of children. Some mothers report having abandoned the abusive relationship to protect their children, because they felt that they were being harmed by domestic violence and did not want children to grow up in the violent environment—"*It was no longer possible for my children to live in that situation, it was no longer possible*" (P2); "*Because I didn't want my daughter to live in the midst of violence (…)*" (P7).

B4. Children's request. One participant revealed that the abandonment of the abusive relationship with her partner was due to a request from her son—"*When I was assaulted again, my son asked to leave, and I said yes (…)*" (P4).

6. Discussion

This study aimed to understand the reasons for staying in/leaving an abusive relationship. The results from the qualitative analysis were organized into two major domains (A. reasons for staying in an abusive relationship vs. B. reasons to leave the abusive relationship) that complement each other, being an integral part of the decision-making process of a victim of violence. We found that extrinsic factors (e.g., related to children, the aggressor, the society) reveal the existence of myths that can make it difficult to interrupt the cycle of violence, and thus it is important that they are considered in an integrated intervention when supporting the victim.

We verified how the fear of social exposure (to the family or society) of their situation was one of the factors that constrained victims from complaining and requesting help, and as a consequence, it contributes to the continuity of the abusive intimate relationships. The language used by participants revealed that fear of exposure to others was reinforced by socio-cultural factors. Society imposes meanings and representations on the women victims (Jones et al. 2017). This is particularly true in the context of gender domination, which Portuguese women also experience through the process of socialization. We witness the individual internalization of cultural discourses that result in external effects, for the victim and for society, by sustaining violence as something normative (Jones et al. 2017). This influences the social acceptance of the problem and affects the way victims talk about the aggressions they experience (Machado and Dias 2010; Sears 2018). Marriage for life and issues such as fidelity and modesty are conceived as eternal values to be respected, contributing to the maintenance

of the abusive relationship (Wilhelm and Tonet 2007). Divorce or separation are viewed negatively and as to be avoided, associated with a fear of social discrimination and a belief that it is potentially more difficult to rebuild normative family life in these circumstances, due to the lack of approval and support of family and friends (Okada 2007).

Another myth that often ties victims of violence to the maintenance of the intimate abusive relationship is related to the belief that children are better off having a father than having no father (Sani et al. 2020). Perhaps because of this, even though they experience a violent relationship and are not fully aware of the risks to their children, some victims experience the dissonance in considering whether or not to leave the abusive relationship, believing their children love both parents and thus that loss of a parent may cause them emotional damage (Stephens 1999; Zink et al. 2003). Consequently, the victim is often in a dilemma such that, in any of the scenarios, she will not feel able to keep her children safe by herself or even be able to provide them the necessary emotional support. Hence, the fear of destroying a family may appear as one of the factors that contribute to victims staying in the abusive relationship (Narvaz and Koller 2006). This kind of thinking reveals the need for interventions to work on developing the self-regulation skills that promote victims' ability to control impulses, manage emotions, and persevere in the face of difficulties (Grych et al. 2015; Hamby et al. 2017).

A belief that a partner's abusive behavior is only temporary and that a restoration of family peace is possible can keep the victim in the abusive intimate relationship. In this context, the victim tends to hide her desires and delude herself in the expectation that her partner will change (Wilhelm and Tonet 2007). This hope dissipates after various disappointments regarding his behavior (Fonseca et al. 2012). The construction of new meanings (Grych et al. 2015) about the permanence of the partner's abusive behavior contributes to the victim leaving their abusive relationship and thereby regaining their self-worth and self-respect (Estrellado and Loh 2019).

Economic dependence was mentioned by a third of the participants as a factor in their decision-making. The scarcity of material resources, combined with low job opportunities and the absence of financial autonomy, makes some victims afraid they cannot guarantee to economically support themselves and their children if they choose to break the relationship (Wilhelm and Tonet 2007). Consistent with the literature (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Estrellado and Loh 2019; Jones et al. 2017) some victims stayed with their abusive partners out of economic necessity, especially if they are unemployed. Shelters are not always a possible and desirable solution (Sani et al. 2019) and in the absence of a safe alternative, staying in an abusive relationship turns out to be the option taken. However, if victims can use their interpersonal resources, alongside other intrinsic strengths such as meaning-making (Baly 2010) and the capacity for self-regulation (Grych et al. 2015), they can sustain their decision and prepare themselves to leave (Bermea et al. 2020), for example, by getting a job (Estrellado and Loh 2019).

Family support was found to influence the victims' motivation for leaving the abusive relationship. According to the resilience portfolio model (Grych et al. 2015), interpersonal forces are a determining factor in the victim's decision to end a violent relationship (Okada 2007). Such support is important for a victim of violence to be able to overcome the undesirable effects resulting from the abusive experience (Levendosky and Graham-Bermann 2001) and to be able to develop other resources for their recovery. It is essential for the victim's self-regulation and promotes their ability to deal with adverse situations (Hamby et al. 2017).

Awareness of continued aggression and, therefore, the prospect that violence will persist over time, even across generations, creates a weariness and intolerance for the abusive intimate relationship in victims, especially where they fear for their own physical wellbeing or that of close family members such as their children (Faro and Sani 2014; Jones and Vetere 2017). The results of this study reinforce the idea that victims choose to leave the abusive relationship based on the best interests and protection of their children (Edleson et al. 2003; Sani and Carvalho 2018; Sani and Lopes 2018; Zink et al. 2003).

7. Implications for Intervention

Domestic violence by an intimate partner is a complex problem. The decision to leave is not simple and is better characterized by a process that is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, such as psychological, physical, economic, familial, social, and cultural factors (Jones et al. 2017) operating at different ecological levels. Professionals can play an extremely important role in supporting the victims of violence in their decision-making, if the support provided meets the needs of the victim.

For this to happen, it is important from the outset to assume a non-pathological stance to safeguard the dignity of the victim and to increase the opportunities to identify the problem and possible solutions. The traditional deficit-centered paradigm must be challenged by an approach that recognizes the resources and strengths of each person (Hamby 2014), that promotes action instead of passivity, and that does not just problematize but becomes part of the solution.

Thinking about resilience does not exclude thinking about risks but rather thinking about risks to convert them into points of intervention. This is sometimes done by inverting them (e.g., lack of support vs. existence of support; passivity vs. assertiveness) and by focusing on ways to promote a subject's resources. This possibility only exists if we access the victim's narratives so that we can understand their anguish, fears, and expectations. Rather than guiding our interventions by a prototype of a defenseless, passive, or dependent victim—that no theoretical model, exclusively, has managed to prove—we need to understand that the complex and multidimensional problem of IPV requires asking questions and outlining answers and that these can only be effective if constructed from the meanings of each individual subject. Only in this way can an individual intervention plan be effective, validating the multiple criteria that weigh on a victim's decision to leave or stay in the abusive relationship.

This study helps to demonstrate the vital role that a qualitative, scientifically based approach can play in recognizing the best intervention strategies for victims of violence. Just as the decision to participate in this study was voluntary, so must the question of whether to leave (or stay in) the relationship be considered by the victim's own decision-making process, supported (without pressure) by professionals. As we find that victims' experiences are full of dissonances, we discuss the importance of adopting an intervention model that seeks to increase the victim's resilience.

According to the Resilience Portfolio Model (Grych et al. 2015), three major categories of forces are highlighted: interpersonal, meanings-making, and self-regulation. Thus, there are both extrinsic and intrinsic forces that can be worked with to enhance the victim's resilience. As proposed by the authors of the model, the strengths and protective factors of the victim can shape how they deal (cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally) with IPV; identifying such factors offers mechanisms through which intrapersonal forces can be used to enhance the results of intervention, making it more effective.

Thus, support professionals should work to extract the strengths and protective factors of individual victims from their narratives. Over time, the recognized extrinsic forces (A, c.f. Figure 1) may help the victim to deal with adversity, by strengthening the meaning-making (B) that enhances change and the capacity for intrinsic forces such as self-regulation (C) to overcome obstacles. To assist the victim in decision-making for a life without violence, professionals can, through their strategies and techniques, develop an approach to intervention that incorporates information (e.g., the dynamics of IPV, effects of IPV on children); counseling (e.g., for the well-being of victims and children); guidance resources (e.g., activating protection and prevention mechanisms such as shelters, the police); and strategies for promoting the stability of resilience forces. Given that the whole process is dynamic, the (in)stability of these forces can determine the failure or success of the intervention, which points to the importance of continuous and present support, which can be tailored as the victim's self-sufficiency grows over time.
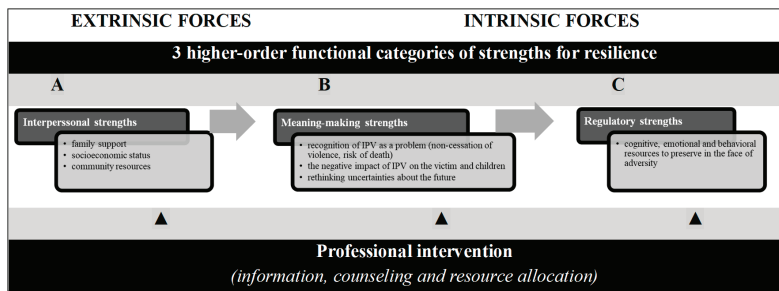
Figure 1. Comprehensive scheme of implications for intervention with victims based on *The Resilience Portfolio Model* (Grych et al. 2015) and the results obtained in this study.

8. Conclusions

The results alert us to the need for professionals to think of support for the victim of IPV as a dynamic process, whose factors, at different times, may constitute an obstacle or a stimulus for the decision-making process concerned with leaving or staying in the abusive relationship. The professional is a crucial mediator who accepts the meaning-making of individuals who, through the process of sharing their narratives, can develop new understandings of their experience of victimization. An intervention that seeks to find the intrinsic or extrinsic forces of the individual (self-regulation, family support) can help victims deal with the situation in a more positive way. A person-centered approach and skills can help victims feel more supported and therefore better able to assess challenges, define strategies for coping with violence, and make a decision to leave the abusive intimate relationship. By paying attention to the victim's narratives and their IPV experience, professionals can offer an intervention more focused on the victim's needs.

The victim's uncertainties about the future reinforce their belief about the need to maintain a violent relationship, with negative consequences for herself and her children. Given that our focus is exclusively on women (with children), we cannot fully consider the role and importance of children in the decision-making process, but it is clear that children are a central element in the victim's decision to stay in or to leave the abusive relationship. However, the presence of other extrinsic factors such as interpersonal support (family, friends, neighbors, community), enhanced and maintained through personal qualities (e.g., gratitude, compassion, generosity, forgiveness), can lead to a better capacity for self-regulation to face adversity. Recognizing this, professionals can plan interventions that enhance the health and well-being of the individual at any stage of the process of leaving or staying in the abusive intimate relationship.

The individual construction of violence is highly influenced by the internalization that takes place in the context of social experience (e.g., gender discrimination, human rights). The identification of extrinsic factors (e.g., security, social support) among the victim's concerns reinforces the need for the individual transformation process to be accompanied by a network in which professionals from various areas (e.g., police, courts, social action) work simultaneously with external factors that can, as we have seen, constrain motivations and decisions for change.

Given its nature, the results of this study cannot be generalized, but it is hoped that they provide an expression of the complexity of the experience of the victims and raise awareness that the intervention process should be flexible enough to attend to the individuality of the victims and the specific combination of factors involved. The resilience model is intended to meet these aims. The study makes a modest contribution to the understanding of the motivational process of leaving the abusive relationship and the development of more effective interventions focused on the victim and their experience of victimization.

To establish a broader understanding of these areas and add further weight to our conclusions, we suggest that future studies could address issues such as the type of sample (comparing victims with

children and without children); the size of the sample (recruiting more participants); gender (creating contrasting groups or mixed samples); and evaluations at different times in the decision-making process to try to identify different phases and/or attempts to confront the problem. Other issues that could be explored in-depth include the aggressor's role and considerations of justice, protection, and children's rights.

There is a complex interplay of multiple factors that influence the victim's decision of whether to leave or stay in an abusive relationship. Going further, adopting an ecological approach to the problem of domestic violence would make it possible to study factors at several levels, including the individual, family, community, and society. An important extension would be to develop studies with samples from different countries to look at the influence of culture.

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Article

Stay or Leave Abusive Dating Relationships: Portuguese Victims' Reasons and Barriers

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Abstract: The decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship is multifactorial and frequently involves a cyclic process involving several phases. This article presents a qualitative analysis regarding the reasons and barriers to stay or leave an abusive dating relationship, as well as the challenges that it implies. A semi-structured, in-depth interview was used to collect data from thirteen dating victims, aged 17–30 years and mainly female (*n* = 12). The emotional and affective dependence of the partner and the belief that behaviour may change emerge as the main reasons presented by the victims to remain in an abusive relationship. Shame, fear of losing the partner, and failure to recognize the abusive relationship were reported as the main barriers to leave the abusive relationship, thus making it difficult to seek help. Understanding reasons to stay in, or barriers to leave, an abusive relationship is fundamental to promoting help-seeking behaviours in victims of dating violence (DV), particularly in the case of young people, since it has serious implications in the developmental pathway of this age group.

Keywords: dating violence (DV); victims of dating violence; young people; leave abusive relationships; stay in abusive relationships; help-seeking

1. Introduction

Violence in intimate relationships is a pervasive social problem that has persisted for several decades and continues to show high prevalence indicators in several European countries (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA), including Portugal (e.g., Azambuja et al. 2013; Lisboa et al. 2009; Lisboa 2016). Lisboa et al. (2009) conducted one of the most important studies on violence against women and men, having found that 38% of interviewed women aged 18 or more had experienced at least one type of physical, psychological or sexual violence, with 41.7% of the offenses being perpetrated by the husband/partner. The results of this important Portuguese research revealed that violence in intimate relationships was a hidden reality, strongly conditioned by the dominant system of values, norms and social models, thus increasing a progressive interest on the part of the scientific community to explore this problem. Since then, several additional Portuguese (e.g., Machado et al. 2010; Neves et al. 2016; Santos and Caridade 2017) studies were developed, documenting the higher prevalence of dating violence (DV), and demonstrating that it is a widespread problem. Other international studies (e.g., Hamby and Turner 2013; Haynie et al. 2013; Jennings et al. 2017; Straus 2004) and important

international organizations—such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) and the World Health Organization (2016)—recognize DV as a serious social and public health issue. DV is defined in this study as the use or threat of violence, in its most varied typologies, i.e., physical, emotional/psychological and sexual, over another person, with whom the subject maintains a relationship of proximity and intimacy (Caridade 2016).

One of the largest intercultural studies on DV, conducted by Straus (2004), and involving 31 universities from 16 countries, reported that the indicators of physical violence in dating relationships may range from 17% to 45% in the last year of dating participants. Another study on the prevalence of DV, developed by Haynie et al. (2013), and based on a representative sample of 2203 students, found values of victimization (35%) and perpetration (31%) of concern. Equally disturbing are the data collected by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) in the United States, estimating that one in five girls and one in seven boys suffered some form of intimate violence between 11 and 17 years of age. A systematic review by Jennings et al. (2017), involving 169 studies and conducted with young people aged 15 to 30 years old, found lower prevalence estimates among younger (<10%), when compared to older people (between 20% and 30%), with women reporting higher indicators of victimization. In Portugal, a study conducted with young people, involving a large sample of 4665 participants (Machado et al. 2010), found that one in four young people reported having experienced at least one episode of DV throughout life. In another study developed by Guerreiro et al. (2017), carried out with a sample of 2500 young people aged between 12 and 18 years old, 7% of the participants acknowledged to having been the target of DV, at least once.

The literature also shows that young adults tend to experience and perpetrate more than one type of DV (e.g., psychological, verbal, sexual violence) in the same or in different situations (Hamby and Turner 2013). Nevertheless, within the context of DV, psychological violence has been identified as the most prevalent type of abuse, when compared to others abusive typologies. A study developed by Fernandéz-González et al. (2014), Spain, found high rates of DV, concluding that psychological violence is the most prevalent abusive typology (90%), followed by physical violence (40%) and finally, by sexual abuse (reported by 27.1% males and 10.9% females). In Portugal, Guerreiro et al. (2017) found that psychological violence emerged as having been the most prevalent type of violence in dating relationships (8.5%), followed by physical violence (5%) and by sexual violence (4.5%). These results corroborate the ones from Machado et al. (2010) study, in Portuguese context. Another relevant study conducted in the Portuguese context by the Alternative Women's Union and Response (UMAR) (2019), with a large sample of 4938 young people from all districts of Portugal, concluded that 67% of the total of young people legitimize at least a behaviour of violence, and 58% of young people reported having experienced at least one of the forms of violence listed in the study's questionnaire.

The international scientific research has also been documenting the adverse impacts of DV on young people's development. Several studies (e.g., Exner-Cortens et al. 2013; Foshee et al. 2013; Shorey et al. 2012) have shown that DV is positively associated with a wide range of behavioural, emotional and mental health problems in the long-term, which may include substance use, depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, poor academic performance or even involvement in antisocial and risky sexual behaviours, along with other forms of interpersonal violence. These consequences may differ, according to the gender of the victim, with girls tending to exhibit more internalization problems (e.g., eating disorders, low self-esteem and emotional distress, panic attacks, alcohol consumption, depressive symptomatology, suicidal thoughts or smoking) (e.g., Ackard et al. 2007; Romito and Grassi 2007) and boys expressing more externalizing problems (e.g., involvement in antisocial behaviour, suicidal ideation, panic attacks or substance use) (Romito and Grassi 2007).

DV help-seeking is of crucial importance to mitigate the risks associated with young people's mental health, improving conflict negotiation and anger management skills, as well as to develop strategies for self-protection and prevention of future violence (Caridade 2018). The decision to leave an abusive

relationship implies that victims of DV identify and recognize the existence of relational problems, and seek external assistance that could involve the choice of formal (e.g., Criminal Police Authorities, health professionals and teachers) or informal (e.g., family, peers) (Liang et al. 2005) support. The literature demonstrates that young people show a reluctance to ask for help (e.g., Gallopin and Leigh 2009; Moore et al. 2015), anticipating possible barriers to effective support. It has been argued that victims can anticipate a negative response (e.g., judgment, overvaluation or devaluation, depreciation, blaming the victim, suggestion to end the relationship) from the source of disclosure to which they intend to seek help (Gallopin and Leigh 2009). A systematic review of Moore et al. (2015) that sought to identify the supports and barriers inherent to the disclosure of the abusive situation concluded that, in general, there are actually few resources/support services available for victims of DV, which may partially explain the fact that young people mainly resort to informal support, that is, parents, peers and other educators. The stigma associated with DV, as well as the absence of screening and assistance protocols for young people involved in abusive dating relationships, are other barriers in accessing formal support services. Another systematic review developed by Pinheiro and Caridade (2019) about request for help in young adults who have experienced DV concluded that victims prefers to use informal sources to disclose DV, thus favouring peers. In the same review, female victims emerged as those showing a greater trend to disclose DV, while also emerging as those who provide more support to victims. Furthermore, in the same review, multiple barriers were identified to disclose DV (e.g., legitimacy of violence, fear of losing partner, shame and self-sufficiency to solve the situation). Other authors (e.g., Sabina and Ho 2014) report the trend for young people to favour the use of informal sources, rather than more formal sources of disclosure, with the request for help essentially focusing on peers. Victims of DV rarely reveal violence to their parents, preferring to do it with peers, for fear of judgment and shame associated with exposing the abuse situation to their parents (Gallopin and Leigh 2009). In a qualitative study, Shen (2011) interviewed ten Taiwan female victims of DV, in order to identify and understand the cultural meanings and barriers that may interfere with help seeking behaviours and six main factors were found: (i) self-reliant culture, (ii) personal and family shame, (iii) secretive and sexual dating relationships, (iv) fear of negative reactions from others, (v) unfamiliarity with available resources, and (vi) revictimization in seeking help. Another qualitative study by Baley (2010) with only six participants found that the participants' reports tend to reflect aspects of broader susceptible cultural or social discourses, with some of them (e.g., discourses of romance and femininity such as the importance of the woman's nurturing role in sustaining the relationship) promoting the maintenance in abusive relationship and others (e.g., discourses of self-reliance and responsibility for one's own actions and needs) helping participants to leave such relationships. The same study concluded that participants report different indicators of strength and agency in dealing with the abusive situation, thus reflecting different forms of intervention at different times. Enander and Holmber (2008) also emphasize the resistance of battered women in the description of the violent dynamics of the relationship, however this does not necessarily leading to leaving the relationship. They identify three overlapping leaving processes: (i) breaking up, involving the physical breakup action; (ii) becoming free, which covers emotion (e.g., love, hate, compassion, hope) and involving release from the strong emotional bond to the batterer, and (iii) understanding, which is related to cognition, in which the woman perceives and interprets the abusive situation in which she was involved. Finally, it is important to highlight that the victim's decision to stay or leave is a multidimensional one (Barnett 2000), involving a complex process usually characterized by a leave/return cycle consisting of several phases, such as: (i) resistance and management of abusive situations; (ii) recognizing abuse and reformulating/reinterpreting behaviours as abusive or not; (iii) "break free", disengage, focusing on the victim's own needs (Anderson and Saunders 2003).

Research Aim

The present study sought to identify the abusive typologies experienced by victims of DV, aiming to identify and understand the factors that lead victims to stay in the abusive relationship and barriers to

help-seeking or to leaving that abusive relationship, as well as the challenges that it implies. In this sense, seeking to understand the victim's reasons and the process inherent to the decision to remain in or leave an abusive relationship, is essential for the support provided to DV victims, as well as to mitigate the consequences/effects that may arise for their welfare. Although there are already some Portuguese studies documenting the disturbing indicators of DV among young people in Portugal (e.g., Caridade 2018; Guerreiro et al. 2017; Machado et al. 2010; Neves et al. 2016; Santos and Caridade 2017), specific studies conducted with DV victims are scarce in the context of Portuguese reality. In addition, other Portuguese studies (e.g., Cerejo 2014; Pinto 2018) that have attempted to analyse the reasons for maintaining or leaving abusive relationships mainly focus on marital relationships.

2. Methods

The research design was qualitative, exploratory, using a purposive sampling method and semi-structured and in-depth interviews that were subjected to content analysis. The option for a qualitative approach is due to the fact that it allows better access to the perceptions of DV victims, as strongly defended by other authors in this field, such as Shen (2011), who also used it in similar studies.

2.1. Participants

As it happens in other relevant qualitative studies in this field (e.g., Baley 2010; Enander and Holmber 2008; Rosen and Stith 1995; Shen 2011), respectively, with six, ten, eleven, and ten participants each, this study comprised a small sample, consisting of 13 participants, mostly female (92%), according to the following inclusion criteria: (a) participants were DV victims and all participants had already ended the abusive relationship at the time of the interview; (b) participants should be between 16 and 30 years old. The age of participants ranged from 17–30 years of age ($M = 25$ and $SD = 3.66$ years old). In terms of victims' education, one completed the basic schooling (8.0%), two completed the 9th grade (15.4%), six completed the 12th grade (46.0%), two with university degree (15.4%) and two with master degree (15.4%). A significant number of respondents (92.3%) identified participants as being heterosexual and only one respondent reported to be homosexual. The duration of the relationship varies between one year and thirteen years (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' characteristics ($n = 13$).

ID	Age	Education	Duration of Relation (Years)
P1	23	12th grade	4
P2	23	Degree	3
P3	26	12th grade	2
P4	29	9th grade	13
P5	28	6th grade	2
P6	26	Master	6
P7	30	12th grade	4
P8	27	Master	3
P9	22	Degree	2
P10	24	9th grade	4
P11	25	12th grade	8
P12	17	12th grade	1
P13	30	12th grade	5

2.2. Procedure

The study was initially approved by the institutional Ethics Committee. For the enrolment of the participants, it became necessary in the first stage, to contact through electronic email, different victim support institutions, which were informed of the purposes of the present study. All the contacted institutions agreed to cooperate in this study, and during 5 months of announcements, 25 persons requested details about the study. After explaining the study in detail, 15 of these 25 persons agreed

to participate in the study. Of those 15, 13 participants met the eligibility criteria and were thus interviewed. The two excluded subjects had already perpetrated violence on dating partners.

After obtaining the informed consent of the participants, the interviews were conducted in the facilities of the support institution and also in a room of the university where the study was carried out, specifically reserved for that purpose. The interviews had a duration ranging from 45 to 120 min and were carried out by researchers with experience in interviewing victims and with specific training in the scope of DV. Due to the possibility of dealing with potentially disturbing experiences, participants were also warned of the possible psychological consequences of the interview. Where necessary, and in the interest of the participants, further specialized support was also made available. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio and were verbatim transcribed in order to preserve the integrity of the reports, aiming further analysis.

2.3. Measure

For the collection of data, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with an interview guide to collect qualitative data, developed for this specific purpose and consisting of six sections, were used. In the first section, the perception of the respondents about the notions of dating and love was explored; the second section is intended to identify and characterize the participants' knowledge regarding the DV problem, namely the identification of abusive typologies associated with DV, the extent of abuse, motivations for the use of violence by the aggressor, and consequences for the victim and aggressor. The third section is intended to characterize abusive experiences and their dynamics. In the fourth section, the participants were asked about the motivations for staying in abusive relationships and the barriers to DV disclosure. The fifth section referred to the reasons for the disclosure of the abusive situation by the participants and, on the type of sources required, either informal or formal, the reason for the DV disclosure or non-disclosure and the types of support provided. Finally, the sixth section took the assessment of the effectiveness of DV disclosure in resolving dating abuse situations into account. Participants were also asked to complete a sociodemographic questionnaire to characterize them in terms of gender, age and duration of relationships. Only Sections 3 and 4 of the interview guide are presented in this paper.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis, which is based on a constructionist perspective, was used. It allows understanding the phenomenon under analysis, its meaning and the way it is experienced, socially constructed and reproduced, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006). The inductive coding procedure was adopted. The themes identified were strongly connected to the data, not attempting to adjust to a pre-existing coding framework, according to what is also advocated by the same authors. The coding was as inclusive as possible, to avoid concealing any potentially important extract in the theme. Various strategies were employed to help ensure credibility and trustworthiness of data: (i) it was intended to ensure saturation of the characteristics of the participants in the sample; (ii) a more dense description of the results was carried out, and the entire coding process was audited by an experienced researcher; (iii) throughout the process, from recruitment to interviewing and data analysis, researchers have always sought to reflect and debate data, sharing preliminary impressions.

3. Results

3.1. Typologies of DV and Help-Seeking Behaviours

The experience of psychological/verbal violence was reported by all victims ($n = 13$), then followed by physical violence ($n = 12$), with the exception of participant P11, who did not identify the latter form of abuse. The social violence, reported by eight participants, involved the restriction and prohibition to establish social contacts with peers, even with parents. Stalking ($n = 3$), sexual violence ($n = 2$) and economic violence ($n = 1$) were the least reported abusive violence typologies by participants. All the

participants who acknowledged to disclose DV (*n* = 10), chose to do so through informal sources such as peers (*n* = 6), parents (*n* = 2), mother (*n* = 2) and siblings (*n* = 1). Only five participants reported having also sought formal sources help such as the police (*n* = 4), teachers (*n* = 1) and health (medical) professionals (*n* = 1) (Table 2).

Table 2. Participants' help-seeking behaviour and type of experienced dating violence (*n* = 13).

ID	Help-Seeking: Yes or No	Help-Seeking Source	Type of Dating Violence Experienced
P1	Yes	Peers/Police	Psychological/verbal; physical; social and stalking
P2	No	-	Psychological/verbal and physical
P3	Yes	Peers, Professional	Psychological/verbal; physical; social and sexual
P4	No	-	Psychological/verbal and physical
P5	Yes	Peers, Parents	Psychological/verbal; physical and social
P6	No	-	Psychological/verbal and physical
P7	Yes	Mother	Psychological; physical and social
P8	Yes	Sibling	Psychological/verbal; physical; social and economic
P9	Yes	Peers	Psychological/verbal; physical and social
P10	Yes	Parents, Police	Psychological/verbal; physical; stalking and social
P11	Yes	Peers, Teacher	Psychological; social and stalking
P12	Yes	Mother, Police	Psychological/verbal and physical
P13	Yes	Peers, Police	Psychological; physical and sexual

3.2. Reasons to Stay in Abusive Dating Relationships

Victims of DV identify five main reasons to stay in abusive relationships (Table 3).

Emotional dependence. Considering the discourses of the twelve participants, emotional dependence is the main reason for remaining in an abusive relationship. In this sense, one victim identified the "blind love" she felt for her partner and that led her to believe that this would be the partner for the entire life, P9: "*I was crazy about him, he was the man I thought he was going to be for my whole life*". "Sick love" was also identified by two other victims as the reason for maintaining the abusive relationship, P11: "*The biggest reason, without being hypocritical, was undoubtedly to like him*", P8: "*It was a sick love*"; or, as mentioned by P12, the fact that the partner had the characteristics that she idealized "*Because he had everything I was looking for in someone . . . He was a beautiful boy, he was the one.*".

Change the behaviour offender beliefs. Nine victims justified their investment and maintenance in the dating relationship, based on the hope that, one day, the partner would change the behaviour. As the speech of P10 demonstrates: "*I lost count of the times I cried, I begged, I waited for him to change him back to what he was*", the belief in changing the abusive behaviour of the partner allowed to manage all the suffering experienced. P12 invoked the positive experiences of the beginning of the dating relationship, namely the most favourable characteristics of the partner, to legitimize the expectations that the behaviour would change and the violence would cease—"*I thought he was going to change, because at the beginning of the relationship he was an impeccable boyfriend, I couldn't imagine anyone better. I was hoping that he would ever get better so I couldn't be accusing him, because he could get better. And I thought it was actually my fault and not his*". P9, in turn, focused on the individual characteristics of the partner to legitimate his abusive conduct, feeding the belief in change: "*I thought he was going to change, because he said he was going to change and that it was going to stop. I thought, that it was with nerves that he did that and that he liked me a lot and that I was the love of his life and that I was the woman for his life and then I apologized once, twice, ten and 20 times, you don't even count the countless times I apologized.*"

Partner dependence. According to four participants, dependence on the partner forced the participant to maintain the abusive relationship. A victim objectively identified the fact that she was pregnant and wanted her daughter to benefit from the father's presence in her development, P3: "*My priority in being with him was that my daughter needed a present father. What would become of her without a father?*". P4 also identified the existence of children and the fact that she did not want to separate them from the father figure, as a justification for maintaining the connection to the abusive partner, also adding the financial dependence of the partner and her difficulty in being able to meet the needs of her four children alone,

P4: "*Perhaps the strongest reason were my children! because I had in my mind that I couldn't separate them from the father. That wasn't fair to them! And then also the financial condition, because I was banned from working because it was useful! And as such it was complicated to leave the house like this with our children without anyone because I had no family background*". The fear of the implications of the children not living with the father was also identified by P11: "*First, that my daughters didn't grow up without a father and second, I never complained because I didn't want to be the reason why their father was in jail*".

Social pressure. Two victims identified the pressure from the family, as having been the source of maintaining the abusive relationship. P11 alluded to the pressure exerted by the mother: "*My mother used to say that it was the life that I chose and that I had to endure it ... It would be a shame to separate*". P13 identified the fact that her partner's family legitimized the abusive relationship because she was pregnant: "*Because his family said that I should be with him, and that it was shameful to be a single mother*".

Feeling of guilt. The maintenance of the abusive relationship also emerged, supported by feeling of guilt by two victims, P4: "*Either it was out of jealousy, or it was because I came upset and I even thought it was my fault*" and P11: "*My mother knew everything and she said it was the life that I had chosen, I had to tolerate it as she also tolerated it.*"

Table 3. Reasons to stay in abusive dating relationships.

ID	Emotional Dependence	Belief in Change	Partner Dependence	Social Pressure	Feeling of Guilt
P1	X	X			
P2	X	X			
P3	X		X		
P4		X	X		X
P5			X		
P6	X	X			
P7	X				
P8	X	X			
P9	X	X			
P10	X	X			
P11	X	X	X	X	
P12	X	X			X
P13	X			X	
Total	11	9	4	2	2

3.3. Barriers to Help-Seeking or Leave Abusive Dating Relationships

Participants identified different barriers to help-seeking before (i.e., from the moment they did search for help) or during the abusive relationship, which constrained their leaving, as indicated in Table 4.

Threats. Five participants identified threats to themselves or others, namely family, as one of the main obstacles to seek help and leave abusive relationships. Thus, P1 claimed that her various efforts to end the relationship were followed by threats to her physical integrity, P1: "*I tried to break up with him off and he said it would happen to me like the case of a boyfriend who hit his girlfriend with an axe on the head and I was afraid, I had no one to turn to. So, I stayed with him because he was completely psychopathic. He was waiting for me at the door behind the trash can*". P5 also identified threats directed at her and her immediate family members as obstacles to ask for help and leave the abusive relationship: "*He threatened to kill me and my parents and sister*". The fear that the partner would comply with the threats made was identified by P1 as an instigator of inaction in the face of the abusive situation: "*It was threats and fear. I was very afraid. He said that if I told someone, if I complained about him or if he knew that someone knew what was happening, that he was going to kill me. It was fear. It was out of fear that I didn't report*" and for P13: "*I lived in fear that something would be done to me because he said he was going to kill me ... I had no family support. I was alone and I was ashamed*".

Fear of losing partner. Four participants justified their difficulty in asking for help and leaving the abusive relationship, given the fear of losing the partner, because they were unable to find another dating partner, as it can be seen in the P2 statement: "*I want him to stay with me and that's why I never even told anyone*". Another victim identified the implications that disclosure of the abusive situation could have on the physical distance of the partner, P9: "*First of all, I didn't want to leave him, it's true, I didn't want to leave him for anything. For example, if I told my mother what could happen is that she was going to press charges and that was unthinkable for me. I didn't want him any harm. I wanted him to stay with me and I never even told anyone and I suffered for myself*". P8 also mentioned the suffering she was subjected to in order to preserve her dating relationship: "… *I was humiliated, and I subjected myself, for example, to betrayals so as not to lose him*".

Shame. Shame also emerged as an indicator of embarrassment in the request for help, in the shame of facing others and taking on abusive dating experiences, as shown by the P8 and P4: "*That was always the shame! We are ashamed to admit what we have been through! And as long as we haven't changed our thinking, we believe things will change! And that is completely wrong*". Another victim, P13, mentioned the shame of assuming herself as a single mother: "*It was shameful to be a single mother*".

Consequences for the partner. The request for help has consequences for the abusive partner, something that three participants identified as having motivated their decision not to seek help, blocking them from leaving the abusive relationship. More specifically, P9 and P12 alluded to the implications that the complaint could have on the partner, e.g., P12: "*I didn't report him because I ended up always apologizing and I didn't want anything to happen to him*" and P11 considered the fear that the partner could be arrested: "*I never complained because I didn't want to be the reason he was in jail*".

Non-recognition of violence. Failure to identify the abusive situation was pointed out by three participants. Specifically, one participant identified the difficulty to recognize psychological aggression, e.g., P2: "*I never thought that what I suffered was violence. Physical violence is something palpable, the psychological is not seen. If you do not see it, it is okay*" and P7 talked about confusing abusive behaviour with demonstrations of love: "*I thought that what was happening was love*".

Lack of support. Two participants identified the lack of social support or the reduced effectiveness and availability of their support network to assist in the management of the abusive situation, as observed in the statements of P13: "*My mother asked me if I was sure I wanted to press charge, she said to think better*", and P6: "*I didn't have a lot of close family, my elder brother had died years before, I have a chronic depressive mother and an absent father*"

Table 4. Barriers to help-seeking or leave abusive dating relationships.

ID	Threat	Lose Partner	Shame	Consequences for Partner	Non-Recognition of Violence	Lack of Support	Knowledge of Parents
P1	X						X
P2		X	X		X		
P3	X						
P4			X				
P5	X						
P6						X	X
P7					X		
P8	X	X	X				
P9		X		X			
P10					X		
P11				X			
P12		X		X			
P13	X		X			X	
Total	5	4	4	3	3	2	2

Knowledge of parents. The fear of parents' reaction towards DV was also identified by two participants, P1: "*If my parents found out, they would never let me leave the house or have someone*" and P7: "*I was afraid my parents would know and there was a disgrace.*"

3.4. Leaving Abusive Relationships: "Break Up" Challenges

Of the total of victims interviewed, ten assumed to disclose DV: eight did so during the abusive relationship and two victims only disclosed DV after the end of the relationship. All participants had, at the time of the interview, already left the abusive relationship. Despite the several reports about maintaining abusive relationships and the difficulties expressed by the victims in leaving the abusive partner and seeking help, it was also possible to identify other agency discourses that would eventually contribute to encouraging the decision to "break up" the abusive relationship. Thus, two participants pointed out the public disclosure of their abusive situation as having been crucial to prevent possible setbacks in their decision making to leave the abusive partner, P1: "*I needed people to know everything, so they would not make me go back to that person*" or as a way to limit possible implications on future relationships, P5: "*I only felt ready to speak at that time and then my past would be interfering with relationships I could have after this*".

The participants also reported the need to be aware of what a healthy relationship implies, namely that it should involve respect, love, complicity, equality as it is possible to observe in the following excerpts: P6: "*A companionship, a mutual assistance based on respect and complicity that has to override even the feelings, much more than a union of interests*", P3: "*There is support, which is due to the support of men or women . . . There is equality. But above all respect, as it is evident*", P9: "*To me, an ideal love is to have a man that I have confidence in, that respects me, that is by my side when I need him, both in bad times and in good time. The one who have the same life goals and who want the best for us two. Affection, love, respect, trust, understanding the other person and being patient when something is not right. I don't believe in love for life, but I believe in wanting things to work*".

The speeches of the victims also signal their ability to re-evaluate and reinterpret the abusive situation in which they were involved, the recognition of the negative implications that the abusive behaviour had on their well-being and the importance of showing a level of self-reliance in relation to meeting their own needs. Some of the participants' speeches in this regard are mentioned: P2: "*The most important thing is to like ourselves and if we subject ourselves to suffering for behaviours that we don't agree with, we shouldn't be like that*", P3: "*At first I thought that [that it was best to be with him] but then I started to realize that it was not living, that it was not good for me, that it brought me suffering*", P4: "*Until I changed! Yes, it was I who had to change my thinking and say I didn't want that anymore! Because as long as our thinking doesn't change, it's no use doing anything and we always come back to the same*", P5: "*I left, because no, we are not obliged to subject ourselves to inappropriate behaviour on the part of anyone. I didn't stay, I made a decision that I knew it would cost me a lot but I left the house. I knew that if I continued, there I would be another victim in the statistics and I had to think about my daughter*", P10: "*I got rid of a monster and managed to have life goals, self-esteem, and self-esteem did not return overnight. I started dreaming again, dreaming that I had a future*".

4. Discussion

The present study involved a sample of Portuguese DV victims, who reported experiencing several abusive DV typologies (psychological/verbal, physical, sexual, stalking, social and economic violence). This qualitative study makes an important contribution to deepening the knowledge of DV in Portugal, considering the fact that a vast majority of Portuguese studies use a quantitative design, involving young people of the general population and studies focusing on victims alone are extremely scarce (Caridade and Dinis 2020) or mainly focus on marital relationships, since other Portuguese studies such as the one of (Cerejo 2014; Pinto 2018). Therefore, this study is also useful to better support preventive and interventional policies in this field.

The typology of psychological/verbal abuse was the most reported by the interviewed DV victims, which is in accordance with what was verified by other previous relevant international (e.g., Fernandéz-González et al. 2014; Straus 2004) and Portuguese studies (e.g., Guerreiro et al. 2017; Machado et al. 2010; Santos and Caridade 2017).

The majority of the participants in this study assumed to have been forced to ask for help at some point, as also found in the study developed by Edwards et al. (2012). This is contrary to what has been documented in other international studies (Gallopin and Leigh 2009; Moore et al. 2015), reporting the reluctance of young people to reveal the abusive situation in which they are involved. The request for help was mainly made to informal sources, such as family and friends. Other international studies (Edwards et al. 2012; Gallopin and Leigh 2009; Sabina and Ho 2014) have also documented the preference of young people to disclose DV to informal sources, as well as the greater reluctance of young people to report DV abuse to the official authorities (Caridade et al. 2019; Pinheiro and Caridade 2019).

The present study allows us to verify that the decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship is influenced by several factors, demonstrating the multidimensional character previously advocated by Barnett (2000), and involving a process with various phases (Enander and Holmber 2008). In this sense, the victims' decisions to remain in an abusive relationship seem to be based primarily on psychological factors such as the emotional dependence on the offender, followed by beliefs in being able to change the offender's behaviour, and feelings of guilt, corroborating previous studies, such as the one from Anderson and Saunders (2003). The participants have also identified the partner's economic dependence and social pressure as external inhibiting factors that are associated with the decision of remaining in abusive relationships (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Barnett 2000). These are disturbing results, as the permanence of young people in problematic and violent relationships may contribute to the increased risk of a cycle of violence, occurring not only in the current relationship, but also in the future (Helm et al. 2015). These results seem therefore to indicate some existence of cultural meanings and barriers in the decision to stay, as also reported by Shen (2011).

Help-seeking is an important step in the process of leaving an abusive relationship. The interviewed DV victims in this study identified many barriers to the disclosure of abusive experience and which constrained the decision of leaving the relationship. The vast majority of factors pointed out by the victims are mainly related to interpersonal factors, such as threats to themselves or others, the fear of losing their partner, the feeling of shame, the consequences that disclosure will have on their partner or the failure to recognize the abuse situation, as supported by Liang et al. (2005). Other studies have also documented these barriers to DV help-seeking (e.g., Ameral et al. 2017; Edwards et al. 2012; Rueda et al. 2015). These results seem to support, in part, the thesis of the culture of self-sufficiency, and therefore the fact that the victims tend to try to solve the situations of victimization alone, either because of shame of assuming themselves as victims, or because they fear losing their privacy or even because they do not want to involve family and friends with matters of this nature, as reported by Shen (2011). The experience or perception of these obstacles may influence the victims' decision to seek help (Liang et al. 2005), leading many victims to remain in an abusive relationship for a long period of time, thus increasing the risk of revictimization and promoting the negative consequences associated with DV (Moore et al. 2015). However, in this study, other discourses were also found, such as self-reliance and focus on the abuse survivors' own needs and the re-evaluation of the abusive situation, which implies recognizing the abusive behaviour of the partner and its implications on the well-being of the victim. Together, this reflects some resistance and agency from abuse survivors to deal with the abusive situation and break up, as shown by other international studies (Baley 2010; Enander and Holmber 2008) in this field.

A more structured knowledge about the reasons that lead young people to stay or leave an abusive relationship, can assume a central role in the protection of victims, namely in the adoption of actions that facilitate the safe and permanent exit from the same abusive relationship, such as a specialized shelter for victims where they can stay, in order to guarantee their safety (Pinheiro and Caridade 2019).

This study has some limitations that must be considered when assessing the results. As mentioned, the small size of the sample, common, as already mentioned, to other relevant studies in the field (e.g., Baley 2010; Enander and Holmber 2008; Rosen and Stith 1995; Shen 2011), is justified by the difficulty in accessing DV victims, which also hindered the construction of a more heterogeneous sample. The sample is mainly composed of heterosexual women ($n = 12$), involved in heterosexual relationships

and all participants were already out of the abusive relationship at the time of the study. In view of the known difficulties of victims involved in same-sex relationships, related to sexual orientation and gender identity, that affect processes of seeking assistance (Calton et al. 2015), it is important that future studies also incorporate this specific population. This study focuses only on victims, which is opposite to other studies which address the general population, but it is important that future research also seeks to include offenders and participants who assume to have been involved in, or perpetrated, this type of abuse, in order to better understand the perpetuation of abusive relationships over time and the reasons behind late requests for help, intensifying the abuse situation. Further studies should also consider developing longitudinal mixed-methodologies with larger and more diverse samples whenever possible, in order to obtain a holistic understanding of the DV phenomenon. In addition, and considering the reasons pointed out by the victims to stay in abusive relationships, namely social pressure and feelings of guilt, it is still of considerable importance that further studies try to explore the cultural meanings and barriers associated with help-seeking behaviours. This knowledge will make it possible to enhance the support provided to victims and eventually to promote culturally sensitive interventions, as clearly highlighted by Shen (2011). Finally, it is important to develop additional research aiming to better understand the factors underlying the preference to seek help from informal sources, as well as the impact of social reactions on the sharing of DV events and experiences by abuse survivors.

5. Conclusions

The present study made it possible to overcome some important gaps in Portuguese scientific research in terms of the reasons and barriers inherent in the victim's decision-making process to stay or leave an abusive dating relationship. This study has identified the main reasons and barriers for staying or leaving abusive relationships (e.g., personal, social and relational) from the perspectives presented by victims of DV. The findings are an important contribution to prevention and intervention efforts, aiming to address the DV problem in Portugal, improving victim's assistance by encouraging help-seeking behaviours.

The findings from this study have important implications for DV screening and intervening. According to the results found in the present study, it is important to continue to invest in the awareness of young people about the phenomenon and encourage the recognition of abusive behaviours, helping victims to establish safer dating relationships and to identify the available resources and support to help deal with DV. Likewise, it is important to invest in actions that are mainly based on a logic of empowerment—that is, that encourage training and skills development, such as identifying their own and their peers' relationships as healthy or unhealthy in order to maintain a positive dating trajectory, identifying a relationship as abusive, and being able to seek help to end it safely.

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Article

When Sexting Crosses the Line: Educator Responsibilities in the Support of Prosocial Adolescent Behavior and the Prevention of Violence

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Abstract: This article presents findings from a systematic literature review that examined various forms of adolescent sexting, and as relevant to educator responsibilities in the support of prosocial behavior and teen dating violence (TDV) prevention within the United States. Proceeding in three parts, part one documents study methodology and offers an overview of adolescent sexting. This section also discusses tensions between sexting as adolescent empowerment and as a form of dating violence. This is followed by a deeper examination of how adolescent sexting is connected to other forms of sexual violence documented to disproportionately affect heterosexual females. Though laws on sexting are minimal, part three discusses U.S. federal and Supreme Court guidance having particular significance for this issue. This section also presents the case of New York State (NYS) to consider the connection between localized policies and schooling practices. Concerned with sexting as a form of consensual adolescent behavior, this article concludes with considerations for educational research, policy, and practice. This article contributes to established research literature weighing the prosocial aspects of sexting against those factors that contribute to and make it difficult to leave a violent relationship. Though empirical research was limited, it also highlights existent research on sexting as relevant to underserved and marginalized adolescent subgroups.

1. When Sexting Crosses the Line: Educator Responsibilities in the Support of Prosocial Adolescent Behavior and the Prevention of Violence

Defined as "the sharing of sexually explicit images, videos, or messages through electronic means", sexting has increased exponentially over the last decade as a modality for teens to explore their sexuality (Madigan et al. 2018). Despite documented evidence that adolescent sexting can serve as a mechanism of sexual exploration and empowerment, there also are known correlations between sexting and teen dating violence (TDV) (Kernsmith et al. 2018). Here, the most common form of dating violence via sexts is non-consensual nude photographs and coercive language to pressure a partner to have sex (Choi et al. 2016). Much like the broader continuum of sexual violence, coercive sexting disproportionately negatively affects female adolescents. In particular, females are pressured to send nude photographs to their partners at significantly higher rates than their male peers (Choi et al. 2016). This form of pressure, which amounts to a lack of digital consent, also was linked to a lack of consent within in-person physical and sexual encounters (Kernsmith et al. 2018).

Currently, there is a paucity of educational research and policy guidance on adolescent sexting. To begin, there is a lack of scholarly consensus over how sexting can work to empower

adolescents on the one hand but amount to sexual violence on the other (Albury and Crawford 2012; Englander 2012; Kernsmith et al. 2018). There also is a lack of school-level policies on sexting (Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Schubert and Wurf 2014). Where policy does exist, it primarily focuses on sexting as child pornography, which stigmatizes its use and hampers positive adolescent development (Albury and Crawford 2012; O'Connor et al. 2017). Much like abstinence-only sexual education programming, policies that stigmatize sexting do not promote safe sexual behavior (Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011). Rather, by making sexting shameful or even punitive, such policies and programming make adolescents less likely to seek help when needed, further isolating them in abusive relationships (Drouin et al. 2015; Hébert et al. 2014).

As the prevalence of sexting increases with new apps and varied modes of sexting on smartphones and other devices, so too does the association of sexting with potentially high-risk behavior (Madigan et al. 2018). Thus, it would follow that both adolescents and the educators who work with them should be knowledgeable about the dynamics, responsibilities, and policies concerning sexting. Where a paucity of knowledge or access to it exists, educational research can assist school and district leaders in the establishment of policy, protocols, and curricula that support sexting as empowering adolescent behavior, as opposed to non-consensual activity resulting in TDV. Toward this end, the purpose of this article was to examine teen sexting in its various formats and as relevant to educator (i.e., administrators, teachers, counselors, and support staff) responsibilities in the promotion of prosocial behaviors and TDV prevention within the United States. We had the secondary aim of providing research evidence to inform future educational study, policy, and/or practice. As discussed in the following section, we conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed empirical research literature. We also examined U.S. policy and case law, with a particular focus on New York State (NYS).

2. Literature Framing and Methodological Guidance

We situate our systematic review within the constructivist paradigm and thus understand knowledge to be socially situated and constructed (Mertens 2020). As white, female scholar-activists, we focus our research on ameliorating educational, gender, and health inequities through policy and practice. Both authors have varied research- and practice-based expertise on sexual violence, intervention, and prevention through K-12 policy and programming. Together, we wanted to build a rationale for studying adolescent sexting as existent on a continuum of prosocial behavior and TDV, and to this end, identify gaps in the research and needed educational policy and practice interventions. Therefore, by identifying themes and gaps in existent knowledge, we deigned this review to make sense of a specific phenomenon and to contribute to theory development and improvements in practice (Littell et al. 2008). Theory building is integral to social sciences scholarship. It provides a historical snapshot of a line of inquiry, as well as emerging patterns, or inconsistencies and explanations for those, with the aim of enhancing knowledge and practical application in a given area (Forsyth 2017; Vartanian 2017).

Our review followed, but modified, Petticrew and Roberts (2006) social sciences method, which called for making determinations about guiding research purpose, database and search term usage, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and article information extraction among other factors. Our modifications largely centered on conducting separate literature and policy searches. We also drew upon Mertens (2020) discussion of reasons for conducting a literature review and delineation of steps involved in the review process. Thus, though our search consisted of peer-reviewed articles and policy texts, as part of our preliminary review process, we consulted additional academic resources, including a comprehensive text by Hasinoff (2015).

To conduct the literature review, we used two database search engines. These included the University at Buffalo Libraries main search engine and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). To conduct the policy review, we did a basic Google search and NYS Legislature public domain engine search. Our literature review search utilized a multi-field search strategy with the following search terms: "adolescent sexting", "teen sexting", "sexting and schools", "sexting law", "sexting and

teen dating violence", "adolescent LGBTQ+ sexting", "BIPOC adolescent sexting", and "adolescent refugee and immigrant sexting". Utilizing the same terms, we conducted a review of U.S. federal policy and Supreme Court case law, as well as examined NYS consolidated educational laws on sexual violence. Given that sexting is a relatively current phenomenon, both searches were limited to materials published within the last 15 years.

Our literature search yielded 183 articles, and our policy search yielded one federal child pornography law but no sexting law. We also found that 26 states have laws on sexting. Though there were 23 consolidated NYS laws related to sexual violence and education, only one law explicitly addressed sexting.

Our article reduction process involved two rounds of review focused first on article titles and abstracts, and second on the full article texts. This process narrowed down 183 articles to 30. Our inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined through our original research aim to examine teen sexting within the U.S. This means, for example, that studies outside of the United States largely were excluded. We also were particularly concerned with connections between sexting as prosocial adolescent behavior and TDV, and as relevant to educational policy and practice. Thus, we included research literature that addressed correlations between sexting and TDV, sexting as a normative adolescent sexual practice rather than a penalized behavior, the legal and emotional consequences of sexting, and student and educator rights and responsibilities surrounding sexting.

Our process yielded limited empirical research on adolescent sexting. Our review of U.S. federal policy and case law, as well as NYS legislation, also found limited established policy guidance on this topic. Out of the research identified, adolescent sexting was shown to be increasing in prevalence. Studies have found a correlation between sexting and sexual behavior offline, including attitudes toward consent in the digital and non-digital spheres. More recent literature also discussed shifts in discourse concerning sexting, namely from deviant and high-risk to exploratory and normalized adolescent behavior. Finally, a lack of consistent legal guidance at federal and state level emerged as a pattern that can create obstacles for educators, as well as opportunities for raising awareness on this issue.

It is important to underscore here that we found a dearth of empirical research literature on teen sexting among BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) youth groups within the U.S. Thus, the research we present in this article primarily focused on heteronormative, white adolescent dating relationships. We address this gap at various points throughout the article, with recommendations for future research involving BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth communities. Furthermore, while our systematic review was not exhaustive and research could exist beyond our parameters, we designed it to identify and critically assess ideas, policies, and practices relevant to adolescent sexting in the U.S. Thus, we are of the view that the review findings will assist researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners working to support adolescent sexting as a form of sexual empowerment as opposed to coercive and violent behavior.

Proceeding in three parts, part one offers an overview of adolescent sexting and the tensions between sexting as empowerment and sexting as TDV. This is followed by a deeper examination of how adolescent sexting is connected to other forms of sexual violence documented to disproportionately affect heterosexual women and girls. Despite the lack of general legal and policy guidance on sexting, part three discusses U.S. federal policies and Supreme Court precedent having particular importance for this issue. This section also presents the case of NYS to consider the connection between more localized policies and schooling practices. Concerned with sexting especially in relation to consensual behavior in the sending and receiving of sexts, this article concludes with key considerations for research, policy, and educational leaders wanting to develop sexual education programming for students and staff.

3. Adolescent Sexting: Sexuality as Empowerment and Violence

Sexting is defined as means for teens to share sexually explicit words, images, or videos in technological format (Madigan et al. 2018). Research among primarily white heterosexual teens finds

that one in four adolescents have shared nude or other sexually explicit texts (Temple et al. 2012). Done with affirmative consent from both (or all) parties, the act of sexting is not inherently predatory, harmful, or shameful. Much the same as kissing or touching, it is considered another mechanism through which to express and explore human sexuality (Döring 2014; Englander 2012; Hasinoff 2015).

The early use of sexting caused parents, educators, and even policy-makers to be concerned that individual reputations would be damaged professionally by the existence of sexually explicit content in a digital footprint. Still, research has demonstrated that sexting largely is a safe, common, and increasingly normal way for adolescents to explore their sexual identities (Gordon-Messer et al. 2013; Englander 2012). Sexting was found to be indicative of adolescent sexual activity offline, typically occurring within the context of an existent relationship or where one or both parties hoped to establish a relationship (Kernsmith et al. 2018). Research also found that adolescents who did not sext were less likely to engage in sexual or dating activities in real life (Temple et al. 2012). Over the course of a four-year study, for example, Choi et al. (2019) determined that the number of sexual partners and general sexual activity were positively correlated with sexting, which affirmed the correlation between on- and off-line sexual activity. This study also concluded that peer sexting norms and perceived norms influenced teens' sexting involvement—again, affirming that when teen sexting was normalized, its prevalence increased (Choi et al. 2019).

Particularly at a time when humans seek connection across a multitude of technical modalities, sexting should not become a mechanism through which to shame adolescents for exploring basic human impulses (Albury et al. 2010). Especially due to its strong predictive value for sexual activity in teens, rather, sexting should be appropriately contextualized as a normal expression of adolescent sexuality (Kernsmith et al. 2018). This framing also can support ways of developing inclusive educational policies and comprehensive sexual education programming for adolescents and school staff (Mori et al. 2019).

However, as with any form of sexual expression, there is the potential for sexting to be used to manipulate, abuse, coerce, and control individual behavior, which contributes to the risk of TDV through sexting in much the same way that violence manifests offline (Choi et al. 2016; Kernsmith et al. 2018). More than half of adolescents were asked by a current romantic partner to send a sext, with males being significantly more likely to ask their female partners to do so (Klettke et al. 2014). Furthermore, nearly every female who was asked repeatedly to send a sext reported feeling uncomfortable doing so (Temple et al. 2012). It is worth underscoring here that research has found that females do coerce their boyfriends to send sexts occasionally, which holds true in broader research on TDV—meaning that females are not exclusively victims but, significantly, also remain disproportionately negatively affected by intimate and sexual violence than their male counterparts (Kernsmith et al. 2018).

Studies have found that younger teens have more pronounced discomfort with sexting than their older peers. As compared to younger counterparts, those in their later teen years seemed more comfortable with sexting, and those who were older than 18 were the least interested in the concept altogether (Temple et al. 2012). This research suggests that while sexting may be a modality for teens to explore their sexuality through, younger adolescents may be more vulnerable to sexting pressure, thus emphasizing the need for comprehensive education on sexting toward the end of sexual violence prevention (Mori et al. 2019).

Overall, adolescents were found to be comfortable sending and receiving sexts, and this mode of communication increasingly has become a normal early step to exploring sexuality offline (Englander 2012). When teens consensually sext, it is a safe mechanism of discovery into what their partner likes, where their own boundaries exist, and it allows a romantic relationship to progress safely (Hasinoff 2015; Temple et al. 2012). It only is when one member of the relationship pressures the other that discomfort occurs (Temple et al. 2012)—and sexting as a consensual, exploratory practice crosses a line. Peer pressure in this regard can involve the repeated asking for sexual information by one partner or the sending of a sext by the coercive partner to someone who did not consent to it (Drouin et al. 2015). Importantly, heteronormative gender values operate in a way that make females in heterosexual relationships think, more so than males, that they are obliged to provide sexts to

their romantic partner. The concept of "not denying" a partner has negative consequences offline, as it establishes inequity in a relationship and limits the ability to consent in all relationship aspects (Noonan and Charles 2009).

Where sexual orientation and gender identity are concerned, our review found that research primarily focused on white heteronormative adolescents. In these relationships, females were more likely to be victimized through sexting by male counterpart aggressors (Albury and Byron 2014; Drouin et al. 2015; Kernsmith et al. 2018; Lippman and Campbell 2014; Temple et al. 2012). Focus groups conducted in Australia with LGBTQ+ youth found that adolescents in same-sex relationships utilized sexting in much the same way that heterosexual teens did (Albury and Byron 2014). Still, the lack of research on same-sex adolescent sexting was argued as making some subjects (namely those who were white, heterosexual, and female) inherently vulnerable to sexting coercion and exploitation, while ignoring the relationship dynamics, and thus other potential victims, outside of this heteronormative dynamic completely (Albury and Byron 2014). Insufficient research on gender-diverse youth who operate outside the margins of heteronormative dating spheres thus disregards the potential for abuse to occur outside the heterosexual female victim and male aggressor binary, and can leave gender diverse youth without proper recourse to recognize sexting red flags or seek help.

Where race is a consideration, we also found limited research, which is troubling given that Black adolescent females experience TDV at disproportionate rates compared to their white peers (Storer et al. 2019) and are more likely to engage in sexual activity (including sexting) at earlier ages than their white counterparts (Steinberg et al. 2019). One study of Black and Latinx tenth grade teens in Southeast Texas documented evidence similar to findings about white adolescents (Fleschler Peskin et al. 2013). While this research failed to establish a correlation between sexting and TDV for youth of color, as with white teens, higher percentages of Black teens received sexts while a lower percentage sent sexts; Latinx teens also were less likely than their Black peers to engage in sexting (Fleschler Peskin et al. 2013). Overall, it was determined that sexting was as prevalent among youth of color as it was with white teens, wherein sexts were frequently sent without the receiver's consent (e.g., unsolicited nude photos sent en masse) and also were shared with someone other than the intended recipient (Fleschler Peskin et al. 2013).

Finally, immigrant youth utilize mobile platforms and social media for a range of activities, including those tied to family reunification. Studies about how displaced youth (i.e., immigrant and refugee) engage in sexting within a U.S. context were noticeably lacking in the literature. One study found that immigrant adolescents in Spain for example, were more likely than their native-born counterparts to accept unknown contacts through social media platforms (Soriano-Ayala et al. 2020). Arguably, within the U.S. political context (Lemke 2017), the use of unknown contacts could put immigrant teens at a higher risk for their sexting partners perpetrating non-consensual sexting activities against them, and thus more research is needed.

Though not situated in the U.S., research on adolescent refugees in Europe found that younger generations use their digital footprint to create an online identity that is not possible through in-person communication (Leurs 2017). These findings underscored that adolescent refugees not only were adept at moving their lives online, but defied everyday lived oppression through a digital archive of performative practices, personalities, and imaginations (Leurs 2017). Empowered adolescent relationships and sexual exploration exist fluidly in time and space. Thus, while not focused on sexting, these findings have meaning in the everyday schooling experience of refugee youth resettled within a U.S. context currently shaped by unbridled nativism, xenophobia, and political discourses of fear (Lemke and Nickerson 2020).

Increasingly, no longer understood as a form of *deviant* discourse predicated on risk and violence (Döring 2014), research evidences that sexting and its social, behavioral, and identity-oriented complexity should be considered in educational policy, curricula, and training. If public education and its actors are to empower adolescents with the tools to create safer communities for themselves with, all elements of how sexuality is expressed should be considered and explored in-depth.

Ostensibly, this means that more research also is needed on the use of sexting among LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and adolescents displaced to the U.S. To ignore this knowledge gap, as well as a rapidly evolving component of teenage sexuality and development, not only is negligent but, as the following section discusses, can contribute to forms of short- and long-term violence.

4. Adolescent Sexting and Connections to Other Forms of Sexual Violence

Though adolescent sexting is understood as largely voluntary and low-risk (Englander 2012), it has the potential to become coercive in much the same way that sexual behavior can become abusive within in-person interactions. Research found that when one party pressures the other for a sext, the capacity to consent effectively is rendered obsolete (Kernsmith et al. 2018). Teens who disregard consent when sexting also were found to overwhelmingly devalue consent across the spectrum of sexual activity, suggesting that behavior surrounding sexting translates to sexual views offline (Kernsmith et al. 2018; Morelli et al. 2016b). For this reason, it is paramount that teens understand their right to consent to sexting as much as their right to consent to physical sex. Devoid of this understanding, it is likely that abuse that begins online will shift to tangible dating violence offline (Choi et al. 2016).

Sexting plays a role in how teens test boundaries of what is and is not sexually consensual early on in a relationship (Döring 2014; Hasinoff 2015). It is necessary to reemphasize here that the act of sexting itself is not understood to possess inherent risk factors that negatively influence adolescent health (Englander 2012; Gordon-Messer et al. 2013). If done safely, sexting is a natural mechanism of sexual expression. Still, there are various factors external to sexting that influence how it affects the wellbeing of adolescents (Drouin et al. 2015). Sexting in the context of an unhealthy relationship has a host of negative effects that directly shape the victim's physical, mental, and socioemotional health, and as previously discussed, unwanted sexting is linked to sexually coercive tactics and intimate partner aggression offline (Dake et al. 2012; Drouin et al. 2015).

Research underscores how myriad forms of TDV are interwoven with one another. Among heterosexual dating youth or those who reported being sexually active in the last year, 12% said a partner had coerced them to sext, and 8% admitted to being the coercer (Kernsmith et al. 2018). Coercive sexting was significantly associated with physical sexual threats, primarily those of having unprotected sex or using threats to convince a partner to have sex (Choi et al. 2016; Kernsmith et al. 2018). Males were substantially more likely in both online and offline instances to be the aggressors, and females were more likely to be victims (Kernsmith et al. 2018).

Tactics used in physical sex coercion among couples in a dating relationship were found in sexting (Choi et al. 2016). One such tactic was the use of threats. While not necessarily overt, subtle threats were utilized if the adolescent victim did not want to sext. Specifically, the perpetrator repeatedly asked for the sext and attempted to make the victim feel obligated to provide it because they were in a relationship; the perpetrator also subtly hinted that they would leave or break up with the victim if that individual did not comply with the request (Drouin et al. 2015). Accordingly, if a teen views coercive behavior as normal or something they are obliged to do, and if they recognize this same behavior in their peer group, youth are less likely to consider the actions a problem (Wolak et al. 2018).

Subtle coercion is not only sexting abuse but a form of emotional manipulation that can translate from the technological sphere to in-person encounters. In one study, for example, nearly 75% of participants who said they experienced sexting coercion also experienced some type of sexual, physical, or psychological abuse from their perpetrator before, during, or after sexting coercion (Drouin et al. 2015). Studies also documented an increased likelihood that teens who experienced coercive sexting were likely to experience concurrent forms of dating violence, whether sexual, physical, emotional, or otherwise (Choi et al. 2016; Drouin et al. 2015; Kernsmith et al. 2018). Sexting coercion was related to both the coercion of physical sex and higher rates of intimate partner aggression (Drouin et al. 2015; Kernsmith et al. 2018)—that, if ignored, can lead to severe short- and long-term health consequences.

Similar to other forms of sexual violence, heterosexual adolescent females were more likely to be the victim of coercive sexting than were their male counterparts, with negative health outcomes including alcohol and substance abuse, risky sexual activity (e.g., sex with multiple partners and unprotected sex), and stigmatization (e.g., particularly by "slut shaming") (Kernsmith et al. 2018; Temple et al. 2012). This research evidence both follows the data for TDV offline and is indicative of evidence that sexting, and sex in general, remains as more permissive for males than females. This contributes to heteronormative behavior that allows males to have more psychological control in relationships, which also maintains an overall unequal balance of power (Noonan and Charles 2009; Temple et al. 2012). This line of research underscores the importance of healthy relationship programming for youth and training for educators.

We also found empirical evidence that teens who experience sexting coercion experience it as a traumatic event. For example, research documented (Drouin et al. 2015) that adolescents who are victims of sexting perceive that experience as traumatically, if not more traumatically, than they would view a physical sexual assault (Drouin et al. 2015). Teens who are victims of sexting also reported higher rates of anxiety and depression, and were found to be at higher risk for suicide and other comorbid mental health concerns, such as psychosis or histrionic personality issues (Drouin et al. 2015). Researchers hypothesized that because a sexted photo or video sent under duress exists in virtual perpetuity in a way that an in-person incident of unwanted sex does not, the perceived stress of the incident remains high across time (Drouin et al. 2015). This reaction to loss of control in the digital realm again mirrors what data support in the physical realm—a loss of control causes chronic stress for the victim, leading to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Miller et al. 2018).

A final issue to consider, therefore, is that sexting carries with it the potential for the nude photo itself to live in perpetuity and resurface without sender knowledge or consent (Drouin et al. 2015). Even when primary sexting (i.e., the initial sext between two people) is consensual, there is risk of secondary sexting (i.e., the sext being sent by a third party or by the receiver without the sender's consent), which adolescents might not think about when sending a consensual sext (Morelli et al. 2016a). While it is known that adolescents share secondary sext photos, research concluded that most adolescents do not consider that this could happen to them when they send sexts, consensual or otherwise (Morelli et al. 2016a). Importantly, males received secondary sexts at higher rates than females, whether individually or in mass texts sent to peers, which indicated a stronger risk of the sexual objectification of females than that of males through sexts (Gordon-Messer et al. 2013).

This form of sexting crosses the consent line to be considered "aggravated sexting", which was described by Morelli et al. (2016a) as "a harmful intention and/or an unwise misuse of sexual images of someone else" (163). What is known as "revenge porn" was more specifically defined as "the public sharing of nude or seminude photos or videos of a lover or ex-lover without [their] permission and sometimes adding information about [their] identity" (Morelli et al. 2016a, 163–64). Secondary sexting also can prompt bullying (e.g., in person or cyber, particularly degrading the person who sent the nude photograph), which has many of the same negative health outcomes as those found in a violent relationship (Temple et al. 2012). Thus, secondary sexting has its own set of negative outcomes, particularly surrounding sexts used for bullying or revenge porn. These findings underscore that sexting as a mechanism for dating violence is real and has tangible negative health outcomes for the survivor. These behaviors also raise substantial legal and policy issues, which are discussed in the following section.

5. U.S. Policy

Currently, a uniform federal definition of sexting does not exist. Instead, adolescents can be charged for sexting under federal and state child pornography laws, as sexting falls under this legal purview. Some state laws follow federal child pornography law[1], which made it a crime to:

Knowingly produce, distribute, receive and/or possess with intent to distribute: a visual depiction of any kind, including a drawing, cartoon, sculpture or painting, that depicts a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct and is obscene; or depicts an image that is or appears to be, a minor engaging in graphic bestiality, sadistic or masochistic abuse, or sexual intercourse, including genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital or oral-anal, whether between persons of the same or opposite sex; and such depiction lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value (Jolicoeur and Zedlewski 2010, p. 5).

This law is situated under jurisprudence concerning the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, wherein non-obscene pornography is protected speech (Jolicoeur and Zedlewski 2010). However, in *New York v. Ferber (1982)*[2], the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that any visual portrayal of minors engaged in sexual acts was beyond the scope of the First Amendment and thus not protected speech. This was due to the immediate and direct harm of child abuse, including emotional and physical dysfunction, and permanent visual record of the abuse due to distribution. This means that adult-to-adult sexting is protected speech under the First Amendment, but when a minor is involved in the same behavior, criminal punishments follow the accused, including the confiscation of profits involved in the commercial exploitation of minors (Jolicoeur and Zedlewski 2010).

Still, not all state laws follow federal statute, and while states interpret their own child pornography laws in adolescent sexting cases under the guise of Supreme Court precedent, case outcomes are varied. Moreover, the Supreme Court has yet to interpret child pornography laws in terms of actual teen sexting, which leaves image content to be tested on a case-by-case basis (Jolicoeur and Zedlewski 2010). As such, while certain cases would not meet the federal definition of child pornography, particular image content would fall within the scope of some states' child pornography laws. This means that state prosecutors have leeway to determine if certain cases of adolescent sexting should or should not be considered child pornography (Jolicoeur and Zedlewski 2010).

Growing awareness of the connection between various forms of sexual violence and short- and long-term negative health effects has prompted state legislatures to pass a range of bills over the last 50 years. Most recently, this has included sexting legislation. Currently, 26 states have laws on sexting, wherein policy language concerning sexting, age of consent, penalty, and revenge porn vary (Hinduja and Patchin 2019). Arguably, the lack of guidance in 24 states and variance between states with laws pose certain challenges to instituting best practices for the promotion of prosocial adolescent sexting behavior. As discussed in the following section, laws in NYS address the age of the sender and receiver (i.e., under 20) and revenge porn, as well as offer an informal and diversionary penalty (i.e., educational programming) for inappropriate sexting, as opposed to a misdemeanor or federal penalty.

6. Spotlight on New York State (NYS)

In addition to federal Title IX mandates and executive office guidance, which has shifted depending upon presidential administration (Lemke 2020), NYS had several higher education laws concerning sexual and domestic violence[3]. Among other things, NYS law created higher education policy, which provided directives on student amnesty in crime reporting, the rights and responsibilities of victims and perpetrators, and directives for all staff as to their responsibilities as mandated reporters.

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[1]   18 U.S.C. § 1466A Obscene Visual Representations of the Sexual Abuse of Children.

[2]   *New York v. Ferber, 1982.* 458 U.S. 747.

[3]   New York Ed. Law. Edn § 6432. Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence and Stalking Prevention Information (2003); New York Ed. Law. Edn § 6434. Investigation of Crimes and Crime Reporting (2003); New York Ed. Law. Edn § 13. Policies and Guidelines (2010); New York Ed. Law. Edn § 6441. Affirmative Consent to Sexual Activity (2015); New York Ed. Law. Edn § 6446. Options for Confidential Disclosure (2015).

These policies also mandated education-based training on sexual and domestic violence for students, faculty, and administrators (Lichty et al. 2008). The required trainings focus on a range of topics such as knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of students and staff as to what constitutes an offense, reporting procedures, and victim resources.

In the U.S., elementary and secondary (i.e., middle and high school) institutions also are governed by Title IX. However, in comparison to those for higher education settings, K-12 policies concerning sexual violence tended to be more incomplete, difficult to find (i.e., not available or difficult to search online), and inconsistent across districts (Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Lichty et al. 2008).Furthermore, loose readings of state and federal law have led to variance in individual school and district interpretation, which means that the rights of students and responsibilities of educational staff are unclear or not addressed. In fact, some school districts were found to not address the issue of adolescent sexual or dating violence at all, instead allowing these topics to fall under umbrella curricula and policies concerning bullying and sexual harassment (Lichty et al. 2008).

While they did not explicitly address adolescent sexting as currently written, NYS bullying and harassment laws[4] could be beneficial for informing policy around sexting for secondary education institutions. The expansion of these laws in ways that incorporate sexting under the umbrella of cyber bullying could aid in developing more thorough educational programming for students that informs them of their rights and responsibilities involving sexting. It also could provide teachers with knowledge of how sexting is used and can be abused among teens.

Importantly, NYS required individuals under twenty years of age convicted of sexting to participate in education reform programs, which provide information about the legal and non-legal consequences of sexting, along with issues associated with sexuality online[5]. However, affirmative consent and sexual activity laws in NYS primarily addressed in-person relationships, and thus lacked comprehensiveness in delineating acceptable behavior online (Hinduja and Patchin 2010). It also was argued that NYS law that addressed adolescent sexting did so in a more disciplinary sense without adequately considering how teens use this modality to explore their sexuality (Hinduja and Patchin 2019). Allowing consensual sexting between minors to be stigmatized and punished as child pornography could contribute to the use of sexting as a means for violence in adolescent relationships (Choi et al. 2016; Kernsmith et al. 2018). Thus, ignoring these considerations in policy, seemingly is a lost opportunity to support the healthy development of adolescent socioemotional, mental, sexual, and overall physical health.

One option to address this would be to modify relevant higher education laws for K-12 secondary school settings. Such laws already have described guidelines for training programs to discourage student-to-student harassment, particularly cyber bullying, and to explain consent within relationships[6]. Together, these laws could inform K-12 policies in a way that would encompass all facets of relationships, particularly in the cyber realm, as adolescent relationships exist increasingly in this sphere (Madigan et al. 2018). Such laws also could inform policies that already mandate violence prevention education, aim to eliminate negative bystander behavior while encouraging positive interventions, teach warning signs of unhealthy relationships, and inform students of their right to consent and what to do if it is violated. Overall, research has suggested that such changes lead to a better understanding of online TDV and could prevent it from moving into the physical realm of adolescent dating relationships (Kernsmith et al. 2018).

While it is helpful for adolescents to understand the scope of the law and their rights, the law itself does not recognize how teens utilize technology to explore their sexuality. Devoid of educational programming and training that address sexting as a healthy, normal part of adolescent relationships, and without policy to reinforce that education, it is argued that teens will continue to hide their use of

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[4]   New York Ed. Law. Edn § 12, Discrimination and Harassment Prohibited (2012); New York Ed. Law. Edn § 13. Policies and
      Guidelines (2010); New York Ed. Law.
[5]   New York Penal Law. § 60.37; Cyber Crime Youth Rescue Act (2019).
[6]   New York Ed. Law. Edn § 13. Policies and Guidelines (2010); Edn § 6441. Affirmative Consent to Sexual Activity (2015).

the practice and not seek help when sexting becomes problematic (Choi et al. 2016). As discussed in the last section, in addition to needed research, comprehensive K-12 educational policy concerned with sexual violence must address mandated staff reporting, adolescent confidentiality in the disclosure of problematic sexting, limitations on punitive disciplinary measures, and the promotion of prosocial relationship behaviors.

7. Considerations for Educational Research, Policy, and Practice

Overall, our review of the literature found a paucity of empirical data about adolescent sexting. In particular, we found that empirical studies concerning BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and immigrant and refugee adolescents were lacking. Furthermore, our review of federal and state policy concerning sexting revealed limitations in federal guidance and significant variance in sexting laws across the 50 states. Though NYS has developed a range of policies concerning sexual violence at the higher education level, gaps existed for K-12 settings, with laws specific to sexting being quite narrow.

First, our review underscored that there is pervasive use of sexting among adolescents, but not fully understood are the socioemotional, mental, and physical risks when sending a sext. We also found that the exploratory and empowering nature of sexting should give pause in order to critically weigh stringent penalties surrounding this teen behavior (Temple et al. 2012). If non-consensual sexting becomes normalized in adolescent relationships, coercive sexting will not be identified as manipulation or abuse (Kernsmith et al. 2018; Drouin et al. 2015). The failure to see a red flag for what it is early on can lead to unwanted sex or violent sexual behavior offline and ultimately shores up injunctive norms surrounding relationship expectations and consent that allow for violence to flourish both on- and offline (Drouin et al. 2015). In addition to awareness around their right to consent, teens should be cognizant of those legal consequences that could befall them when propagating the spread of secondary texts with the intent to harm, slander, or bully the original sender (Morelli et al. 2016a).

Still, more research is needed on sexting as prosocial adolescent behavior and as potential TDV. Since sexting will continue to occur in the identity-forming years of adolescence with or without adult permission, simply making sexting a punishable offense will not stop its use (Mori et al. 2019). Thus, more research also is needed on how disciplinary measures work either to push adolescent sexting into a space of shame and isolation, where it is more likely to be used as a mechanism of the kinds of abuse discussed previously, or how it can support the development of healthy, consenting adolescent sexual relationships.

For educational policy-makers, leaders, and other practitioners considering this issue, policy should be enacted in a manner that does not penalize youth-to-youth sexting but aims to curtail cyber-bullying, adult-to-youth sexts, and sexual assault (Temple et al. 2012). If sexting is a medium that teens increasingly use to explore their sexuality, then it also should be a space where they can establish their own sense of agency, consent, and voice (Albury and Crawford 2012). Arguably, teens who explore sex through sexting can better create a sense of boundaries, be more effective at deciding how and what they want to consent to, and be better able to safely practice expressions of their own sexuality (Hasinoff 2015; Temple et al. 2012). If sexting practices indicate real life sexual practices in unhealthy relationships, it follows that they might also be a space for teens to discover healthy means of sexual connection. In much the same way that sexting might be considered the first step to creating a sexual relationship between two teens who are romantically interested in one another (Temple et al. 2012), so too can it be a space where they flex their muscles of empowerment, choice, and boundary-setting in sexual activity offline.

Second, marginalized and minoritized youth experience commercialized, domestic, and sexual violence at disproportionate rates compared to their white peers, which can leave them more vulnerable to continued abuse (Lemke 2019a, 2019b; Storer et al. 2019). These same subgroups are also less likely to report to authority figures when they have concerns surrounding something as sensitive as their sexuality (Hébert et al. 2014). This ultimately stymies youth from accessing medical, safety, and other

social provision resources needed to extract themselves from the harmful relationships that some policies intended to prevent.

However, we found limited empirical research on sexting among marginalized and minoritized adolescent subpopulations in the U.S. This is a concern given that adolescent sexting is predictive of sexual behavior offline and that sexting has the potential to become coercive and violent. Thus, more research on the interconnections between educational culture, policies, and practice as relevant to sexting and these subpopulations is needed. Such research could provide insight into how the digital personalities of diverse adolescent groups present and the ways in which sexting can shift from adolescent exploration to TDV. Additional research also could provide understanding of cultural influences in the digital sphere and help educational practitioners to tailor violence prevention programs to the specific needs of diverse youth communities.

Third, historical moral panics concerning sexuality affected wider normative culture in ways that shamed consensual sexual behavior, as well as castigated and criminalized those deemed as *Other* by U.S. law and policy (Lemke 2017). In much the same way, panic and punitive measures around adolescent sexting could operate to silence youth. Defining sexting as unilaterally pathological runs the risk of setting students up to be isolated in violent relationships without recourse for help. When such violence goes unacknowledged, it not only can increase in intensity within the current relationship but it leaves both the victim and the perpetrator likely to experience future violence in their adult relationships (Miller et al. 2018).

Thus, although more research is needed on the intersection between status quo values in the U.S. and adolescent sexting, school policy could be created with the understanding that though sexting can contribute to various forms of harm, it also is part of normal teenage sexual expression and behavior (Albury et al. 2010). Educators should have an understanding of the technology used by teens and also be able to address issues surrounding that technology, specifically as it relates to sexting (Kernsmith et al. 2018; Madigan et al. 2018). This requires a school policy that does not make sexting in and of itself punitive. Rather, educational policies, training, and curricula must balance sexting as a healthy modality through which to explore sexuality (Kernsmith et al. 2018). As with other modalities addressed in comprehensive sexual education, youth must recognize when a line is or can be crossed from consensual sexting to dating violence. Utilizing and expanding existing cyber bullying laws to incorporate sexting and revenge porn are critical for informing this policy.

Finally, our review of the literature underscored that creating penalties for youth who sext that are tantamount to rape or child sexual abuse serve to minimize those events when they truly do occur (Temple et al. 2012). Where child pornography laws have punished teen use of sexting, some have argued this to be "excessive and inappropriate, and fails to recognize the sexual agency and developing ethics of young people" (Albury and Crawford 2012, 464). Rigid sexting policies for teens also create an unnecessary social panic, which potentially disregards adolescent agency and empowerment concerning choice in their own sexuality.

Policies that make sexting a shameful experience or crime punishable by a lifetime status as a sex offender only increase the risk for alienating teens who have experienced coercive sexting. By creating policies that make consensual adolescent sexting a crime, potentially punishable by labeling the participant a permanent sex offender, also does little more than reduce the complexity of teenage sexuality to an act of violence (Angelides 2013). Federal and state policy gray areas provide unique challenges for school and district leaders looking to develop their own educational policies in this area. Still, as found in our review of NYS policy, some policies offer guideposts for educational leaders who want to address sexting in a prosocial manner.

8. Conclusions

Sexting is a form of healthy sexual exploration that will be used by teens. The right to consent to sexting also is complex, particularly when considering it within the context of secondary sexting, revenge porn, and aggravated sexting. Still, if teens are better equipped to navigate their digital

personalities and experiences through educational initiatives that incorporate sexting (Mori et al. 2019), they will be less likely to normalize coercive behavior both on- and offline, thus utilizing sexting as a healthy form of sexual expression. As discussed in this article, this tension only serves to underscore the need to further understand adolescent sexting, the development and implementation of research-based policies concerned with sexting use and abuse, and best practices for the discussion of sexting in educational curricula and training.

Sexting cannot be pushed under the rug through archaic and morally punitive policies. It also cannot be shamed away through abstinence-only sexual education, nor will it disappear by pretending it does not exist. Following from the research presented herein, districts and schools should have comprehensive policies and programming to address sexting. All teachers, and not just those who teach health education, should have proper support and resources to discuss and address this issue. In this vein, sexual education curricula should balance the discussion of sexting as a healthy means to explore sexuality, while also identifying the legality of sexting and parameters within which it can cross the line and turn violent.

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Article

Leaving a Violent Child Marriage: Experiences of Adult Survivors in Uganda

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Abstract: Violence against women and girls remains a major public health threat the world over. A significant amount of violence experienced by women is perpetrated by their intimate partners. Moreover, the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence is amplified for women and girls who get married before turning 18. However, there is little documented information on how they escape such violent relationships. This article provides insight into the factors that help survivors of child marriage to leave violent relationships. It is based on in-depth interviews with 26 Ugandan women who married before they were 18. Four main factors helped child marriage survivors to leave violent unions: (1) having a secure base to return to; (2) reaching a tipping point in the relationship; (3) financial independence; and (4) intervention of a significant other. The significance of some factors varied with the age of the survivor at the point of leaving. It is concluded that parental support is a key facilitative factor for leaving violent relationships in the context of child marriage within a low resource setting. Interventions to promote positive parenting may significantly contribute to minimising the proportions of girls trapped in violent unions and incidences of child marriage in the long run.

Keywords: child marriage; girls; intimate partner violence; leaving violent relationships; survivor; Uganda; women

1. Introduction

Violence against women and girls remains a major public health threat the world over. It is estimated that 35% of women worldwide experience either physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime (WHO 2017). A significant amount of violence experienced by women and girls is that perpetrated by their intimate partners. According to the WHO (2017), almost one third of women who have been in a relationship in their lifetime have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their intimate partner. Global and country-specific evidence shows that males are the main perpetrators of the intimate partner violence (IPV) meted out to women. For instance, a systematic review of global and regional evidence found that close to 40% of all murdered women were killed by a male intimate partner (WHO 2013). In the USA, 99% of the IPV against women reported in 2008 was perpetrated by men (National Data on Intimate Partner Violence 2012). In Uganda, demographic and health survey data of 2011 cite men as the main perpetrators of IPV (UBOS and ICF 2012).

The risk of experiencing IPV is amplified for women and girls who get married or into union before turning 18. Global statistics show that girls who marry before the age of 15 are 50% more likely to face physical or sexual violence from a partner (Girls Not Brides 2020). An analysis of data from a population-based survey in Ethiopia found that girls who married before the age of 15 were almost four times more likely to have experienced forced first marital sex compared to those who

married at 18 and 19 years (Erulkar 2013). In Bangladesh, a longitudinal multilevel analysis of how the community prevalence of very early child marriage influenced a woman's risk of IPV found that almost 70% of the women who reported experiencing physical abuse had married before the age of 18 (Yount et al. 2016). Demographic and health survey data of 34 low and middle income countries outside South Asia show that incidences of physical and sexual IPV were higher among women who married as children (29%) compared with those who married as adults (20%). Similarly, a randomised controlled trial of an IPV prevention programme in rural Cote d'Ivoire found that all forms of IPV were higher among women who married as child brides compared to those who got into union as adults (Falb et al. 2015). In Uganda, the demographic and health survey of 2016 shows that slightly higher proportions of women who married before their 18th birthday experienced physical violence compared to their counterparts who married at the age of 18 and above (UBOS and ICF 2018).

Previous studies show that leaving a violent intimate relationship is often a difficult and complex decision. Abused women usually balance personal, familial and even communal interests in decisions to stay or leave (Barnett 2000; Khoury and Wehbi 2016). Several barriers are associated with the entrapment of women in violent intimate relationships. These include economic limitations such as poverty and financial dependence and socio-cultural considerations such as social proscriptions that discourage divorce/separation and openness about experiences of IPV, and social and gender norms that value family continuity at all costs, normalise IPV against women, put the responsibility of family preservation on women and present marriage as a source of status and respect for women (Barnett 2000, 2001; Lacey 2010; Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Willan et al. 2019). Other inhibiting factors include the investment of significant amounts of time in the relationship, fears over the safety of the survivor and their family, fear of reprisal and lack of strong formal and informal support systems, among others (Barnett 2000, 2001; Lacey 2010). This is not to suggest that women are passive victims of IPV when they do not report or leave violent relationships. Studies show that abused women often take steps to minimise or address the violence during the relationships. These include seeking the intervention of, and emotional support from, family, friends and community organisations, adjusting behaviours to meet the violent partner's expectations, threatening to report the abusive partner, limiting contact with the abuser in the home and seeking professional help (Ruiz-Pérez et al. 2006; Zink et al. 2006; Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Willan et al. 2019).

On the other hand, women's decisions to leave abusive intimate partner relationships are associated with several social, economic and psychological factors. An analysis of data from the domestic violence experiment in Omaha, Nebraska, USA, found that women who were financially independent and had a high self-esteem, an internal locus of control and less fear for their safety or reprisals were more likely to leave violent intimate partner relationships (Kim and Gray 2008). A qualitative study of how women in Lebanon made the decision to leave violent domestic relationships underlined the significance of family support in their decisions to leave (Khoury and Wehbi 2016). In South Africa, Willan et al. (2019) show that young women typically left violent love-relationships when they had strong emotional and economic support from family, the violence became public and their partners openly displayed their infidelity and no longer fulfilled their expectations of providing financial and material support to them and/or their children.

While there is considerable literature on the factors that influence leave or stay decisions among women experiencing IPV (see Barnett 2000, 2001; Anderson and Saunders 2003; Burman and Chantler 2005; Kim and Gray 2008; Lindgren and Renck 2008; Lacey 2010), it is not clear how such decisions play out in the context of child marriage, particularly within low resource settings. Girls who get into union before 18 years tend to be portrayed as passive victims of IPV due to their young age, limited education, economic dependence and broader structural issues that may curtail their agency, such as patriarchal norms promoting male domination and female subordination (Mathur et al. 2003; Yount et al. 2016; Kidman 2017). This article, however, shows that girls can exercise agency by taking proactive steps to escape IPV inflicted within child marriages. We examine the factors that can help child brides to leave violent marriages in a low resource context.

These data can provide insight into protective factors and supports that can be built or reinforced to empower girls in Uganda and similar contexts to recognise and swiftly escape violent intimate partner relationships during adolescence and later in life.

In the Ugandan local context, the term marriage is used fluidly to refer to both formal and informal unions. Formal unions include those that are customarily/traditionally recognised or conducted by religious leaders and government officials. In informal unions the couple live together as husband and wife, without legalising the relationship through any of the formal mechanisms (Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD 2015a)). Borrowing from the local conception of marriage in Uganda, we define child marriage as the formal or informal union of girls below the age of 18 years.

2. Analytic Framework

We have utilised structuration theory and the agency-structure debate to contextualise the experiences of the young women in their marital relationships and the attendant decisions that they made during the relationships (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992; Wendt 1987). Giddens recognises the primacy of human agency in influencing the structures in place, conceived metaphysically (Giddens 1984). Structures are defined as entailing rules and resources (Giddens 1984), with the latter further expounded by Sewell (1992) as constituting inanimate and animate objects existing naturally or manufactured to control and lay claims on power. Human resources, on the other hand, are conceived of as dexterity, physical strength, knowledge and emotional intelligence (commitment), which perpetuates the accessibility and control of power. Giddens (1984, p. 9) asserts that "agency refers not to the intention people have in doing those things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place". This implies that power influences the situation and also suggests that intention alone is not equal to agency, as agency implies action, and can also bring about unintended consequences. Although Giddens recognises human agency and its position in societal interactions (Smith 1998; Turner 1986) and the influence on social structure, other scholars subscribing mainly to realist social theory schools, such as Margaret Archer (2000, 2003), tend to critique this view and that of symbolic interactionism and emphasise instead the critical (and independent) role of structure in regulating human behaviour and its constraining influence on agency.

Sewell (1992) points out that there are variances in the stock of agency across societies and within any given society, indicating how occupations of different positions in society determine different accessibility to, and exercise of, agency. This analysis by Sewell enables the appreciation of the situation of young women in a violent relationship, where their accessibility to power and resources to negotiate freedom was not simple due to the lack of control over the rules and structures prevailing in their marital homes. The current study lends credence to the literature by recognising the *agency, strengths* and resilience of the young women, while recognising the limitations arising from structural constraints (see Archer 2003; Dessler 1989; Sewell 1992). Our study further suggests that the fact that the young women leave violent relationships is a demonstration of agency which shows their efforts to positively control the direction of their lives. However, the failure of the relationships and limited options for escape may suggest constraint on the part of the young women's agency (agential powers) to exert control over social structures.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design, Setting and Population

The article draws on data from a qualitative study of issues, beliefs and experiences of child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV) in Uganda. The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative design, where data were collected at one point in time. Qualitative methodology is sensitive to unique personal experiences, perceptions, beliefs and meanings of individuals and was therefore considered to be the most appropriate approach for exploring the lived experiences of child marriage survivors.

The study was conducted in a total of six districts, four of which were located in central Uganda (Kampala, Wakiso, Masaka and Nakasongola) and two (Gulu and Amuru) were in northern Uganda. The districts were targeted for their experience of military conflict, location (rural and urban) and the perceived risk and prevalence of child marriage.

3.2. Sampling

The sample included a total of 45 adult women (18 years and above) who got married before the age of 18 years, 22 and 23 of whom were from the northern and central regions of Uganda, respectively. To capture the diverse lived experiences of survivors of child marriage, the women respondents were selected purposively on the basis of various criteria, including age at first marriage, residence (rural or urban), current marital status and whether they were still married to the same men or left the relationship. Eligible participants were identified with the help of community leaders and community-based organisations working with GBV survivors.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between August and September 2018, with the support of 10 research assistants proficient in the local languages spoken in the central and northern regions of Uganda, notably Luganda and Acholi, respectively. In-depth interviews were held with each of the selected women. These were held in the local language using a guide with a list of open-ended questions to enable the participants to express their views. Each interview lasted between 40 min and 1 h and explored a range of issues pertaining to the participants' experience of child marriage. There were questions on participants' socio-demographic characteristics such as age at first marriage and highest level of education attained, the events that preceded the marriage, experiences during the union including IPV and GBV in general, their responses to abuse and available support services, among others. Probes and prompts were used to motivate participants to provide more detailed information on topics of interest where necessary. The flexibility offered by in-depth interviews enabled us to gain deep insights into the participants' lived experiences of child marriage, while keeping the interview focused on a specific range of topics (Russell 2002).

3.4. Data Management and Analysis

All the interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English by a team of experts. Each transcript was compared with the original audio interview by a member of the core research team proficient in the local language to ensure consistency in the translation. The transcripts were then word processed and imported into NVivo.12 qualitative data analysis software for further management. Coding was conducted by two members of the core research team. To enhance the accuracy of the process, the two members regularly reviewed each other's work to minimise contradictions in the interpretation and assignment of codes to specific data. In addition, where there was doubt on the appropriate code to assign to specific statements, the two members always discussed the coding to build consensus.

The analysis was conducted thematically. The process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts several times and coding relevant sections, words, paragraphs and sentences according to the identified themes and categories. The themes for the article were generated deductively and inductively (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). We started off with two broad themes derived from GBV literature: experience of intimate partner violence and leaving violent relationships. Intimate partner violence was defined as physical, sexual, economic and emotional abuse and controlling behaviour subjected to the survivor by their partner. The data were scrutinised for evidence of IPV and the identified forms assigned the relevant categories, that is, physical, sexual and emotional abuse and controlling behaviour. Data were further examined to identify patterns of leaving violent child marriages with the intent of understanding the underlying facilitative factors. The analysis generated the four main

sub-themes on which the article is based: having a secure base to return to, reaching a tipping point in the relationship, financial independence and intervention of a significant other.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study was granted ethical approval by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Makerere University's School of Social Sciences (MAKSS REC 09.18.217) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (SS 4939). Written informed consent was obtained from all the selected participants before involving them in the study. Participants who could not write due to illiteracy and other factors signed using a thumb print. The informed consent forms were printed in Luganda, Luo and English. Literate participants were given the opportunity to read and interpret the consent form before signing, except where they opted to be read to. The research assistants read and interpreted the informed consent forms for illiterate and semi-illiterate participants. The consent process involved informing the participants of the study purpose, how they had been selected, the benefits of participation and their right to voluntary participation and to withdraw from the study at any point, as well as assuring them of confidentiality.

We ensured confidentiality by making sure that participants were interviewed in private spaces, where the conversation could not be heard by others. The participants were not asked for their real names during the interviews. Unauthorised access to interview transcripts was restricted by locking computer files with passwords. In addition, the digital audio recordings were deleted after transcription. Only pseudonyms are used in this article. Participants who exhibited signs of trauma during the interviews were referred to our partner agencies for psychosocial support.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of Study Participants

The article is based on the experiences of 26 survivors of child marriage who suffered IPV during the relationships. Their age at first marriage ranged from 13 to 17 years. All the women were of a reproductive age (15 to 49 years). All the women had attained some level of formal education. However, only six of them completed lower secondary education (S1–S4). Most (15) women were currently married, but only five were still married to their first partners. Most (17) women were involved in an income-generating activity at the time of the study.

4.2. Experiences of IPV during Child Marriage

The women reported suffering physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse at the hands of their partners. The physical abuse mainly took the form of beatings, slaps, kicking and pinching. Several of the men committed the physical violence while under the influence of alcohol. Viola, who had got married at the age of 13 after getting pregnant and being sent away by her single mother to join the man, explained that she had left the relationship due to constantly being beaten by a drunk partner. " … I left because the man used to mistreat me through beating me up especially after taking alcohol. Instead of talking to me softly, he would just quarrel. Anything small I did, he quarreled and beat me up," she said.

Similar experiences were shared by Atwendya, who reported that she was often beaten, kicked, pinched and slapped by her partner.

> I was abused for sure. Like sometimes I would be busy with our baby then he asks me to wash his clothes. Whenever I failed to wash them, he would come back start quarreling and after kick, slap or hit me severely. He would complain, 'I have already told you to do this for me, but you are wasting time on your child,' then he would pull my ears, and pinch my cheeks or call me stupid.

Sexual abuse mainly took the form of forceful sex. Some of the women reported that their partners were so forceful that they sometimes ruptured their sexual organs. For instance, Tina told of the excruciating pain and injuries she suffered from her first sexual intercourse after traditionally marrying her husband at the age of 16.

> When I reached his [husband] place the first time we had sexual intercourse he tore my private parts. I started fearing to have sex with him but he would force me. I had a lot of pain and it was severe every time I tried to urinate. When the urine mixed with the wound, the pain became unbearable. I felt like not eating or drinking anything because of the pain.

Several women reported being forced into sex by husbands who were under the influence of alcohol. Akanyo narrated how her partner had subjected her to physical and sexual abuse a few weeks into the relationship.

> ... after a few weeks of staying together he started beating me whenever he came back home drunk. He would force me to have sex any time and even worse when he was drunk. He beat me for many days consecutively ...

In regard to emotional violence, the women reported that they were often insulted, denigrated, taunted, belittled and emotionally tortured by men who brought mistresses home to have sex with in their presence. Miriam told of the emotional pain of being regularly chased from her marital bed for her husband to sleep with another woman. She narrated, " ... He also returned with women and asked me to either sleep outside the house or on the floor and for them to sleep on the bed. It was really painful."

Eva related how she was constantly taunted, belittled and denigrated by her partner for conceiving so soon after delivering her first baby.

> I conceived again when my first child was only 9 months old. I really felt bad when I found out that I had conceived. Life became hard and unbearable; my husband would insult me every time, saying that I am stupid. He blamed me for conceiving again when the child was still young. He would always ask me, 'Can't you ask and seek guidance from your friends, are you stupid?' I really lost my peace of mind due to those insults ...

Economic violence manifested in the forms of denial of opportunities to work and exclusion from decisions on the sale of household assets or benefitting from the proceeds. For example, asked if she was involved in any income-generating activity during the child marriage, Birabwa revealed that she had been prohibited from working by her partner. "No, I did not do anything. He would not allow me to work. I would just stay home doing nothing but take care of the home and my child," she responded. Dembe related how her husband's tendency to make unilateral decisions had culminated in the sale of land they had purchased together without her consent.

> He was dictatorial, that was his [main] problem. He never listened to anyone, he would decide on his own. We had bought a plot of land, where I thought we would build our home, but he sold it without my consent. When the old woman who had sold that plot to us told me that my husband had sold the land, I confronted him about it, then we had an altercation. He decided to stop coming back home for almost a month because he was very angry with me.

In some cases, the men sold the food cultivated by the women for household consumption without their consent and used it on alcohol or other pleasures, as explained by Korina, who was 14 years old at first marriage.

> He never used to take care of us. Not even any support. He abandoned us with his mother
> in the village. He would come to sell most of the food harvest like sorghum and beans,
> then he would go to buy alcohol. He would steal and exchange the harvest with alcohol.
> Even sorghum, when it is already mixed with cassava, he would select all the cassava from
> the sorghum and exchange it for alcohol and, worse of all, at times he would even exchange
> the plants when we have not yet harvested them to get alcohol. I would just see people
> harvesting the crops because my husband had already taken alcohol of their worth . . .
> Sometimes he would get women and fail to return home for days.

Some of the women were overworked and economically exploited by their partners, while others reported being neglected and denied financial and material support. Tina recounted being enslaved during her two years of marriage to a suitor identified by her relatives while she was 16. She remarked, "I was his slave; I would work for him then he just sells all the harvest without my knowledge. He would overwork me beyond my age, and when the crops got ready sell them without even informing me."

Lamwaka told of how her polygamous husband refused to support her in spite of earning an income from farming.

> He had money, he even married me traditionally. He did not drink [alcohol]; he was a farmer
> but would never consider supporting me [economically]. All he did was insult me and keep
> bragging that he was not educated but could keep two women. Yet he did not give us any
> assistance. I would look for the money to sustain me on my own.

In addition, several of the women reported being controlled by their partner. The majority of them attributed the controlling behaviour to their partner's extreme jealousy and unfounded suspicions of their infidelity. Nasozi decried the physical and emotional torture she was subjected to during her one year of marriage, as her partner attempted to prevent her from interacting with men he suspected she was having affairs with.

> That man was very abusive. He would even lock me in the house; that I should not leave
> to go anywhere until he comes back home. When he came back [home] he would start to
> quarrel and beat me for no reason. Every person I would talk to, he would say that you have
> an affair with him; he was an extremely jealous man. He thought I would do what he does so
> he would lock me in the house as he went to drink alcohol and find me when he returned.

Similarly, Viola had to seek permission from her partner before going on any errand away from home. She said that it was his way of monitoring her movements to be certain about who she interacted with at a time.

> I had to ask for permission for almost everything; whether I am going to collect firewood or
> go somewhere, it was him to decide for me. Even when he wasn't around, I had to wait for
> him to get back home so that he grants me permission for anything I wanted to do outside
> the home.

Some women were sequestered because their partners and sometimes in-laws were afraid that they would be arrested for defilement, while others feared that the girls would escape and return to their natal homes. Atwendya was lured to elope with a man at the age of 15 when he realised that he had got her pregnant, then he took her to live with his relatives over 100 km away. She told of how her in-laws initially hid her in the house for fear of being arrested and charged with the concealment of a defilement case.

> At first, when I eloped to join their [husband's] family, they were locking me inside the house.
> They never allowed me to move out of the house. They said that I was still too young to be
> married, so they were afraid and scared that they would be arrested in case the authorities
> got to see me with the pregnancy.

Miriam, who also eloped with a man at the age of 14, and moved over 200 km away from her natal home, was banned from talking to community members by her partner. She suspected that he was wary that they could give her ideas to escape and return home.

> My husband used to stop me from talking to other people. Whenever he found me talking to anyone, he could beat me and ask me what the discussion was all about. He also used to lock me in the house whenever he found me with anyone in the village. On such days, I would survive on taking water. I think he feared that they would help me to escape.

As shown, the women typically suffered two or more forms of abuse at the hands of their partners. Their relationships can be described as involving multiple experiences of IPV.

4.3. Leaving Violent Relationships

The majority of women in this study left their violent marriages within three years, which meant most of them were still adolescents when they did so. Not surprisingly, most of the women reported that the men were "good" at the beginning of the union, variously describing them as caring, supportive, respectful, understanding, communicative and providing for their needs. The reversal in the behaviour of partners typically coincided with the women's first pregnancy, the birth of the first child or the partner's initiation of a relationship with another woman/women. Only one woman could not explain the sudden change in her partner's behaviour. She nevertheless thought that his ex-wife, who had reemerged after learning that he had married again, was deliberately annoying him so that he would shift the anger to her and eventually force her to leave. In the following sub-sections, we present four factors that emerged as key in helping the women to leave violent relationships. These include having a secure base to return to, reaching a tipping point in the relationship, financial independence and intervention of a significant other.

4.4. Having a Secure Base to Return to

> *Many like me stay in their violent marriages because there is nowhere else to go, but for me I had somewhere to run to which is home.* (Atuku, a Child Marriage Survivor)

As Atuku clearly puts it in the above excerpt, having a secure place—where they felt safe, loved or at least provided for—to return to was critical in our respondents' decisions to leave violent child marriages. This was particularly the case for participants who left as adolescents, all of whom were dependent and therefore needed a place where they could be supported, not only morally but also economically. As such, all but one of the participants who left their partners as adolescents returned to their parents' or guardian's home. For example, Nasozi was typical of this response. She decided to return to her mother, where she expected to be loved and cherished, when her one-year relationship with the man she had eloped with at 16 years turned violent. She lived with a single mother and had been lured into this sexual relationship to cope with extreme deprivation at home. She soon discovered that she was pregnant and eloped with her partner without informing her mother or any other relative of her whereabouts. "We were lacking almost everything. I would be at school but lacking almost everything. I thought that because this man was giving me some money whenever I needed something, he would provide for and help my mother as well," she explained. While the marital relationship had started well, the man's behaviour changed for the worse after she delivered her first child.

> He first treated me well and I was happy. Initially he provided me with whatever I wanted. But when I gave birth, he changed his behaviour. He no longer provided for me. I was no longer respected; he would take alcohol and come back home to insult and beat me up. When I gave birth the situation worsened.

It was at this point that she decided to reconcile with her mother and seek to return home.

I told myself that my mother is a very poor and needy person but loves me. I called my mother, told her about my situation and the suffering I was going through. I asked for her forgiveness then she told me to come back home. So, I decided to leave the man and came back [home]. I am doing something to sustain myself, my child and my mother; it may be small, but I feel safe and have a peace of mind.

Some women returned to their parents even if they were not completely welcome, which further underscores the significance of parental support for child marriage survivor's decisions to leave violent relationships. For example, Dembe decided to return home and apologise to her father when a year of economic and emotional abuse at the hands of her partner culminated in her abandonment in hospital when she had a stillbirth. She had married her partner aged 15 when her father and stepmother chased her from home while she was pregnant, following a streak of rebellious behaviour that had started two years earlier. She reported that sleeping with men had been her way of coping with the neglect and abuse perpetrated mainly by her stepmother, who had also managed to bias her father against her. But life proved difficult from the moment she joined her partner. He could not provide for her because he was not working. She had to do heavy work like fetching water and cultivating people's gardens to get food, in spite of being pregnant. He controlled her, sometimes forcefully took her money away and often insulted and blamed her for her predicament. "He would yell at me and say, 'you are suffering because you are illiterate, you thought getting married to me would be your source of security instead of staying with your parents and focusing on your studies'," she narrated. When Dembe lost her baby during a complicated birth, her partner abandoned her in the hospital and never returned. With nowhere else to go, she decided to return home to her parents.

I decided to go back to my father's home since there was nothing left to hold on to; I had lost my baby and my husband had deserted me. I went and apologised to my father, he forgave and took me back in.

Unlike Nasozi, Dembe did not receive the warmest of receptions after being accepted back into the family. She continued to be maltreated by her stepmother but nevertheless stayed. She intimated that the suffering at her natal home was not comparable to the abuse she had endured during the marriage. "My stepmother continued to isolate and discriminate against me. She mistreated me so much, but I stayed; at least there was food," she remarked.

Several participants without a secure base to return to could not leave the marriages as early as they had wished to, while others in this situation who attempted to leave soon returned to their violent partners. One example of this was Ageno, who had married at the age of 14 and initially got trapped in her abusive relationship because she lacked a secure base to return to. She had been pushed into marriage in the hope of escaping maltreatment from the aunt who had assumed her guardianship when both her parents died in the war that ravaged northern Uganda for two decades. She explained, "I used to stay with my aunt. She would mistreat me a lot, so I decided to get married; hoping that life would be better." She soon learned that married life was difficult and decided to return home to her guardian slightly over a year later, shortly after giving birth to her first child. However, she did not get the reception and care she had hoped for and ended up returning to her abusive partner.

I was only 14 years old, life in marriage was not easy but I had nothing to do until I gave birth. My husband was also very young, and we were both young parents so it was very difficult for us. I did not get any respect from my husband. When he started bringing other women he became so rude and would even force me into having sex with him. He would not allow me to use family planning [methods]. I went back to my aunt, but the situation was even worse, so I decided to come back to my husband.

Fifteen years later Ageno did eventually leave the marriage and return to her relatives. However, at this point she was an adult capable of fending for herself and her family and so could manage without

much support from her relatives. At the time we conducted the study she was living independently with her children in a house she had constructed on the family land and deriving a livelihood from subsistence farming. She indicated that she was supporting her family without much assistance from her relatives, who were overburdened by their own responsibilities. Her case demonstrates that lacking a secure base to return to was key in her inability to leave the relationship earlier.

While Ageno made an attempt to leave during her adolescence and eventually left as an adult, 25-year-old Korina was still trapped in a violent and unhappy marriage because she felt that she had no secure place to go to. She told of the multiple forms of abuse she had suffered at the hands of her partner since early on in the marriage she entered at 14 years.

> He was disrespectful and abusive; he would over work me beyond my age. I would always do casual labour in order to buy food. He is an alcoholic, when I gave birth to my 2nd and 3rd born, he started beating me. We would quarrel and fight regularly. Do you see this gap [in my teeth]? I lost my 2 teeth during a fight with him . . . all these scars on my body are signs of his abuse towards me and now he has abandoned me with his mother.

During the interview, Korina, who lost both parents to war and her guardian (a grandmother) due to natural causes, intimated that she was still living in a violent relationship primarily because she had no parent/guardian to return to. In explaining why parents should avoid pushing their children into early marriage, she indicated that she would be long out of the relationship if her mother were still alive. She remarked:

> Like for me right now, if my mother was alive, I would have gone back to her with my children long ago. And that means the burden [of care] would go back to my mother. So I would never want such a burden for me in future because in case their husbands reject them, the burden will be mine.

Similarly, Maria was stuck in an abusive relationship because she saw no way out. While she had considered the option of returning home to her parents, she hesitated to leave because she anticipated rejection from her father. She remarked:

> He always beats me up severely, because he is a drunkard. Every time he comes back [home] he hits and yells at me and often times leaves me without food or any single coin for home use. He also does not allow me to visit any of my relatives or friends. When he finds out that I have gone somewhere may be to look for food, or to talk to someone about what I am going through, he beats me severely . . . I have thought about leaving but I have nowhere to go. My father who would have helped me now hates us [girls] all. When I got pregnant at 15 years while in school, he vowed never to educate a girl-child beyond O [ordinary] level.

All the above cases show that for child marriage survivors, having a secure base to return to is a critical factor in their decision to leave violent relationships. This is primarily because they are usually young and dependent when they get into union and thus unable to support themselves and their offspring on their own.

4.5. Reaching a Tipping Point in the Relationship

All the women endured the IPV for a while before reaching a breaking point, when the violence escalated, they got fed up, or realised that it would only escalate more. Several of the participants reported seeking the intervention of local authorities and relatives to stop the abuse but gave up when they realised that their partners would not change. Atuku told of how the escalation in violence from her partner had pushed her to a point of leaving, even though she had tried to endure it at first in the hope that he would change.

He had changed and kept on changing for the worst. I used to be battered, slapped, insulted and undermined most of the time. At first, I thought he would change, and I tried to endure but the abuse just got worse as time passed by. All I can say is that I am happy and lucky to be alive because he could have beaten me during my pregnancy; and who knows what, I could even have died. All I can say is that if a woman is going through such kind of violence she should just leave and move on.

In contrast, Birabwa tried to stop the violence by seeking help from the police, the village chairperson and her mother, grandmother and mother-in-law, but he refused to change. She felt that she had no choice but to leave. Encouragement from her grandmother and mother-in-law strengthened her resolve to abandon the marriage.

I reported him to the LC (local council) chairman the day he almost strangled me to death. He [LC] came and intervened. He cautioned him, then he ran away for a while. When he came back he continued from where he had stopped. I reported him to the police station; they called and cautioned him to stop beating me up like that and to settle and resolve issues amicably. He was even imprisoned but he did not change and told them that no one makes decisions for him. I also reported him to his mother, my mother and grandmother but all their efforts resulted to nothing. He continued with his bad behaviour; I had to leave him. Even my grandmother and his mother advised me to leave to avoid being killed, so I left.

Two participants who also reported an escalation in their partner's promiscuous behaviour indicated that they had been pushed to leave by the fear of being infected by HIV. Ndibalekera explained how a rapid increase in the number of children sired by her partner led her to leave the marriage out of fear for her health.

He used to treat me with respect at first but later started to abuse me verbally, was quarrelsome and would tell me that the food I grow is not on our [natal] family land; so he would sell it off without giving me any money … He would come back annoyed; may be confused by his concubines and would displace his anger on us. I left his home eventually when he started producing children with different women and bringing them to me. I feared for my life; I thought that I would get HIV … , so I left to protect my life.

Participants who were yet to reach such tipping points tended to stay in the abusive relationships in the hope that their partners' behaviour would soon change. An example was Nalutaaya, a 32-year-old woman who had married her partner at the age of 15. She told of how the little improvement in her partner's behaviour, following the intervention of the LC committee, had encouraged her to stay, because she was hopeful that he would eventually stop abusing her.

He also used to beat me and often abused me verbally, threw my things out and would always tell me to get out of his house because he had got a mature woman. I reported him to the LC chairperson then they called and cautioned him. He reduced the beating a bit, and stopped throwing my things out. That is why I am still here. I am hopeful that he will eventually calm down [stop the abuse].

Nalutaaya's case further attests to the facilitative role of reaching a tipping point in child marriage survivors' decisions to leave abusive relationships.

4.6. Financial Independence

Having a source of income that could support independent living outside the marriage enabled some women to leave abusive relationships and re-establish themselves. The women who managed this were mainly adult survivors who did not wish to return to their parents or other relatives. A typical example was Nampijja, a mother of three who earned a livelihood from teaching in a primary school.

She was able to meticulously plan her exit using her income. She narrated that she had used her savings to pay for a room, where she relocated with her children without the knowledge of her abusive and controlling partner. The partner had threatened to kill her if she left him and indeed attempted to strangle her the first time she had tried to leave.

> I had kept money on my account and after three months, managed to look for a room which wasn't expensive. I went to the bank, picked the money and paid for the house. I stealthily moved my things and three children, then we entered our new room. He thought that I had gone back to my parents, so he did not follow us.

While the husband eventually found Nampijja and the children and threatened her to take him back, she was able to stand her ground because she could provide for herself and the children without his support.

> When he discovered that I had rented a room, he came shouting that I am a very complicated woman. How can I rent a house without his consent? He threatened that I would not manage to provide for the children without his support. That I should accept him to live with us again. He forgot that we had managed without him for three months . . . He talked a lot but I also reminded him of all the ills he did to me. I told him about how peaceful I was in my room. I told him, 'when I was still at your place I was looking so miserable but currently you admire me'. I told him that our relationship ended long ago. He continued pestering me for a while but eventually gave up.

In contrast, Eva, who was entirely dependent on her abusive partner for survival, felt powerless to leave because she could not fathom how to start out on her own without his support, as she explained.

> He does not beat, but insults and neglects me. I sometimes think of leaving, but then I think about the children; what will I feed them on, how about school fees. I have no job, so he provides everything for the home. He pays rent, school fees [and] buys food. Every time I think about leaving, I counsel myself to stay because I don't know where to start from.

As shown, having a source of income helped the women to support themselves and their children away from the marriage. In many cases, it offered choices and a way out of the violent relationships.

4.7. Intervention of a Significant Other

Several participants relied on the support and assistance of significant others to leave their abusive marriages. These included relatives, neighbours and other community members. Some provided financial assistance to enable survivors to travel back home, while others helped them to find alternative places to go to (e.g., getting them alternative livelihood opportunities). Miriam, for example, benefitted from the benevolence of community members to escape from her abusive marriage and travel back home to her parents. Trapped in an abusive relationship over 200 kilometres away, Miriam could not raise the transport fare to return home. She was only saved by a concerned and kind neighbour, who mobilised other community members to contribute 60,000 Uganda Shillings (USD 16.2) for her fare. Miriam had initially shared her predicament with this neighbour, who then reported the abuse to the village chairperson. Whilst the chairperson had cautioned Miriam's partner, the abuse had not stopped.

> I shared my plight with our neighbour; she went to the LC [Chairperson] and reported. My husband and his relatives were summoned and warned to stop mistreating me, but they never changed. Later, my neighbour mobilised people to contribute 60,000 shillings which helped me to travel back to my mother's place.

Another case shows how both the advice of others and their practical support could be important, but also that leaving was not always permanent. Tina finally managed to leave her abusive husband with the help of a sister, who tapped into her social network to find her an alternative place to live. Tina had initially fled her marital home during a physical fight with her husband and returned to her guardian (an aunt), but ended up returning when she realised that support from her aunt and other relatives was not as forthcoming as she had hoped.

> I decided to go back to my marital home because of my child. I could not afford to meet needs like soap to wash clothes, so life was a bit harder because no one could provide for me and my child; everyone was minding their own business.

However, the cold reception she received from her husband on her return convinced the sister who had escorted her to reclaim her marital home that he would not change. She immediately advised Tina to leave her marriage for good and linked her to a friend who was willing and able to take her in.

> First of all, the words he used on seeing me back with my sister [accompanying me] were very vulgar. He also told us that he is his own boss; no one gives him orders in his home. He arrogantly mentioned that when he marries a woman, her money becomes his own money. You know my sister had advised him to change his behaviour, that is why he was saying this. After saying all of those things to us, my sister realised that the man would not change; she advised me to leave him for good. She took me to her friend's home because she [my sister] was married and it was inappropriate for me to go to her marital home. The friend where she took me was older than [both of] us, and not married, so I began a new life with her. I would fry samosas with her every morning and deliver them to different shops for sale, then she would pay me some little money.

There were a few cases where relatives removed women from an abusive marriage, but not principally because their husbands were abusive. Rather, because their partners had not paid the bride price. Bride price includes material items (e.g., food, cows, goats, clothes) and money that the bride's family receives from the groom and his family to legitimise and validate the marriage. Viola was picked up and returned home on the instruction of her mother, after she learned that her husband was not ready to pay her bride price. "So my mother sent people to pick me, saying that if there was no bride price they should take me home; so they took me home," she said. Similarly, Angee indicated that her relatives had removed her from her marital home because her partner could not pay *luk* (a fine for producing children with a woman without paying bride price). She related, "I was married but my people took me away from him [my partner] because they wanted him to pay *luk* then he did not pay so now, I have moved on."

While several relations helped our respondents to leave violent marriages, some were instrumental in encouraging them to stay. These relations typically encouraged the survivors to endure because IPV is integral to married life. Some of them cited the violence they experienced in their own unions to show that it was a "normal" pattern in marriage. Tina told of how her aunt talked her into staying when she learned that she wanted to leave a few months into the relationship.

> Whenever he would find me with his brother, he would beat me up severely. I decided to ask him to let me go to my grandmother since the pregnancy was almost due . . . He refused me to go. So after some time my aunt came; I think he is the one who called her. She told me, 'You will have to endure all the pain and sufferings, because we also passed through such trials; that's marriage.' I told her but aunt, I am tired of this situation I won't be able to endure. She then told me, 'it is the pregnancy that is making you feel and look like that.'

Eighteen-year-old Nemaite told of how the adult women she has befriended during her marriage of two years keep advising her not to leave on the premise that she will find no better man.

Yes, I have made friends, but all of them are mature adult women; some are my neighbours. The only advice they give me is that I should stay in my marriage despite the challenges. That all men are like that; I am not going to find any special angel.

Essentially, interventions of significant others may be seen as a double-edged sword that can either encourage survivors of child marriage to leave or stay in violent relationships.

5. Discussion

We have presented the factors that helped former child brides to leave the violent marriages. The aim was to highlight potential protective factors that can be built, harnessed or reinforced to empower and encourage girls to swiftly leave violent intimate partner relationships.

The study identified four factors that were key in helping child marriage survivors to leave violent unions: having a secure base to return to, where they could be supported emotionally and materially; reaching a tipping point when the violence escalates or they realise that it will only escalate more and that their partners will not change; intervention of significant others who provide assistance that is crucial for leaving or physically picking up the survivor; and financial independence that enables an independent living away from the marriage, though this may only be feasible for those women who are old enough to work independently. The significance of informal support, financial independence and escalation of violence in women's decisions to leave violent intimate relationships has been discussed elsewhere (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Kim and Gray 2008; Lacey 2010; Lacey et al. 2011; Baholo et al. 2015; Khoury and Wehbi 2016). However, this study shows that for adolescents, having a secure place with loving and supportive parents/guardians to return to is particularly critical if they are to sustainably leave violent marriages. It not only encourages them to leave, but also prevents them from returning to violent unions. As shown, abused adolescents typically returned to their parents/guardians. Those who did not find adequate support from their parents/guardians returned to their violent partners because they had neither the resources nor the capacity to sufficiently support themselves without assistance. Therefore, parental support can be seen as a critical factor in helping young child marriage survivors in a low resource setting to escape violence in the relationships. This is because family remains the main fallback for most people experiencing crises or need in these contexts. This pattern supports the findings of Willan and colleagues (2019), who show that young women from impoverished informal settlements of South Africa are more likely to leave violent intimate relationships if they have strong emotional and economic support from their families.

The significance of parental support in child marriage survivors' decisions to leave and stay away from violent relationships underlines the need to equip parents with positive parenting skills. Described as an approach to parenting that is child-centred and which emphasises care, support, encouragement, empathy and positive disciplining (UNICEF 2018), positive parenting will contribute to making homes a safe haven where children and young people facing IPV can seek refuge. Child marriage survivors who anticipated love, empathy and support from their parents/guardians typically thought of returning home to escape the violence. Moreover, positive parenting can address drivers related to the quality of parenting, such as domestic child abuse and neglect (Bantebya et al. 2014), and contribute to preventing child marriages in the long run. Since several child marriages are preceded by elopement and unwanted teenage pregnancies that strain relationships between girls and their parents/guardians, it is important that parents/guardians are helped to understand that sometimes children only learn when they face uncomfortable consequences from their actions (UNICEF 2018). This will enable them to proactively forgive and provide girls who wish to leave violent relationships a second chance to learn and grow from their mistakes. As our data show, girls were only able to sustainably leave violent marriages where their parents/guardians displayed positive parenting attributes such as forgiving and taking them in, listening to them and understanding their situations, encouraging them to leave and providing them both material and emotional support during the process of and after leaving violent unions.

However, positive parenting may be difficult to realise in a context of poverty and socio-cultural norms that condone violence against women and girls and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage. Therefore, optimising the protective benefits of positive parenting interventions requires that they be proactively complemented with economic strengthening programmes to improve the capacity of parents/guardians to provide for their children. In addition, continuous community engagement is necessary to change negative social norms and customs that promote the tolerance of violence against women and girls, as these often prevent parents/guardians from helping their children to leave abusive marriages. These include beliefs that normalise IPV in marriage and the custom of paying bride price. Our data show that several parents/guardians encouraged girls to stay in violent relationships because they had been socialised to believe that IPV is a normal day-to-day experience of married women. An analysis of 2016 demographic and health survey data for Uganda also found high levels of tolerance towards IPV against women in the country (Ghose and Yaya 2019). This normalisation of violence could be attributed in part to the forces of patriarchy and male dominance which prevail in most African societies, a demonstration of the preponderance of structure over the human agency of the girls (Archer 2000, 2003). Other parents/guardians may encourage girls to stay in violent relationships when bride price has been paid. It is not uncommon for African women who wish to leave violent marriages to meet resistance from their parents, who are often afraid of being asked to refund the bride price (Wendo 2004), again buttressed by the power of structure (Archer 2003).

Our data show that several girls and women tend to see returning to their natal home as the only viable way out of violent marriages, even where family members are hostile towards them. This pattern not only suggests a paucity of formal protection services for survivors of GBV such as temporary shelters and rehabilitation centres, but also limited awareness of the few available ones. This observation is corroborated by country-specific reports which highlight the limited funding for GBV-related services and activities as a key impediment to its elimination in Uganda (MGLSD 2015b). It is for instance indicated that the country has only 16 shelters for GBV survivors, in spite of the high incidence of violence against women and girls. Moreover, survivors' access to the few GBV shelters and related services is not only constrained by inadequate funding but also by the limited awareness about their availability (MGLSD 2018; Mugerwa and Wesaka 2020). Therefore, there is a need to invest in protection services to increase safety nets for survivors of GBV whose informal support networks may be feeble or absent. In addition, a massive awareness of available services should be created to increase demand for them and encourage women and girls who would otherwise be entrapped in violent relationships due to lack of viable alternatives to leave. Awareness of a shelter has been identified as a key facilitator to women's departure from abusive intimate relationships in other parts of Africa (Baholo et al. 2015).

While the support of significant others such as family and friends is often critical in helping abused women leave violent relationships (Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Willan et al. 2019), our study shows that the intervention of survivors' significant others can be both a facilitator and a barrier in decisions to leave. Several of our participants accessed resources that were crucial in enabling them to leave with the support of their relations, while others left at their encouragement. However, some of the social relations including kin, neighbours and friends encouraged several women and girls to stay in violent relationships by normalising the abuse. This suggests that community members are a potentially powerful resource in fighting IPV and GBV in general and providing support to survivors, if equipped with the correct information. In this regard, harnessing the protective role of the community requires interventions to challenge and change beliefs and social norms that condone violence against women and girls. It is important, furthermore, to increase community awareness of GBV, its forms, dangers, existing interventions, the referral pathway and the potential role of individuals and families in preventing, reporting and helping survivors to escape the abuse. Community dialogues drawing participants from different sections of the community can be a useful strategy for providing information on IPV and GBV and getting them to reflect on the drivers and dangers of the two practices and on possible solutions to addressing them. Mechanisms to engage children and young people in

age-appropriate conversations on the meaning and manifestations of IPV and GBV, its consequences, how to protect themselves and others from abuse and where to seek support may help to enhance their capacity to recognise and take action. Some of these topics could be incorporated in the sexual and reproductive health education curriculum for adolescents and young people and tackled during discussions of intimate relationships.

It is evident that in the context of child marriage, the significance of specific factors in decisions to leave may depend on the age of the survivor. For instance, data show that having a secure base to return to was more critical for adolescents who were generally dependent and too young to support themselves and their offspring on their own, while financial independence applied more to survivors who left as adults and sought to live independently. This suggests that programmes targeting survivors of IPV involved in child marriage should consider being flexible enough to address the likely variations in the needs of different age groups.

Drawing on structuration theory and the agency-structure debate (Sewell 1992; Wendt 1987; Giddens 1984), we recognise both the importance of human agency and the importance of rules, regulations, norms and value systems in influencing the young women's decisions and ability to leave violent unions. This implies that interventions to encourage young women to leave abusive relationships ought to address both individual and structural constraints for success.

Study Limitations

This study was carried out among women in central and northern Uganda, and results may not be applicable to all communities of Uganda. We believe, however, that the findings are possibly illustrative and indicative of experiences of women who go through child marriages across Ugandan communities.

6. Conclusions

The study unravels important and interesting issues for understanding decisions of leaving violent relationships among women who marry off as children (below 18 years). While it undoubtedly presents an intricate exposition of the young women's experience of violent unions, it also describes the complexity of the relationships, and especially the structural forces that the young women encounter in making decisions and taking actions to leave the relationships. It shows that, at the end of it all, the decisions to leave boiled down to agential powers and resources held by, and accessed from, the young women's environment.

Key among the resources is parental support, which emerged as a key facilitative factor for young women to leave violent relationships in the context of child marriage within a low resource setting. Therefore, interventions to improve the quality of parenting and the safety of homes can create an enabling environment that may not only encourage girls to leave violent unions but also prevent incidences of child marriage in the long run. Such interventions include trainings to equip parents/guardians with positive parenting skills, household economic strengthening programmes to improve parents'/guardians' capacities to provide for their families and community dialogues to challenge and change negative social norms that normalise violence against children and women.

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Article

"Should I Stay, or Should I Go?": The Experiences of, and Choices Available to Women of South Asian Heritage Living in the UK When Leaving a Relationship of Choice Following Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

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Abstract: Researching South Asian women who have departed social norms and married outside the social conventions of their culture widens our understanding and knowledge on the topic of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). This paper will investigate how the women participating in the research navigated the socialisation of arranged marriage and expectations on them as women, and how this influenced their decisions to remain in violent and abusive relationships. Often without family support or the "safety net" of an arranged marriage, the women stayed in abusive relationships longer than they would have done if the marriage had been arranged. The findings show that the women's experiences of leaving the relationship are mediated by the context of forming an intimate relationship. A qualitative research approach using Black Feminist Standpoint Epistemology employed thematic analysis to give voice to South Asian women's experiences and insights into their experiences of, and responses to, leaving abusive relationships. The analysis shows that women's agentic act of choosing a partner became the very barrier to leaving the relationship if it turned violent and abusive.

Keywords: women of South Asian heritage; intimate partner violence (IPV); choosing own partner; UK; leaving an intimate relationship

1. Introduction

There are many pretexts surrounding why women remain in abusive relationships, including lack of financial resources and support networks, fear of further violence, and religious beliefs (Collins 2000; Eckstein 2011). South Asian women living in the UK face additional barriers that may prevent them from leaving violent and abusive relationships, including bringing shame on the family (Siddiqui 2013), and their insecure immigration status (Anitha and Gill 2011). South Asian women's experiences of domestic violence include forced marriage and honour-based violence (Gill and Hamed 2016; Siddiqui 2013). Perpetrators of domestic violence can be their family members carrying out honour-based violence (Gill and Harvey 2017; Siddiqui 2011) as well as domestic abuse from their intimate partner (Gill 2004). Social constructs of honour and shame are used to coerce and force many South Asian women into marriage and to remain within such marriages (Sen 2005). Women's transgressions of such codes can become the legitimising avenue for violence (Gill 2003). Feminists have charted examples where family honour is considered to be violated and brought the family into disrepute (Anitha and Gill 2011; Gill and Brah 2014; Siddiqui 2013): pregnancy outside of marriage (Meetoo and Mirza 2007, p. 187) or choosing an intimate partner (Siddiqui 2005). For some South Asian women, choosing a partner outside the social conventions of arranged marriage can be a potential arena of abuse and

violence (Amos and Parmar 1984; Anitha and Gill 2009; Dustin and Phillips 2008; Gill and Harrison 2019; Siddiqui 2013).

The aim of this paper is to critically examine South Asian women's experiences of leaving a violent relationship in the UK where they had chosen their partner, with and without the support of their families. Using a Black Feminist lens, the research explored the lived experiences of these women in transgressing the cultural norms of arranged marriage and, in particular, critically investigating their negotiations in responding to the consequences they faced in leaving an abusive intimate relationship that they themselves had chosen. The analysis shows that the agentic act of choosing an intimate partner became the very barrier to leaving the relationship if it turned violent and abusive. By researching South Asian women who have departed social norms and married outside the social conventions of their culture, the research widens our understanding and knowledge on the topic of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The research examined the experiences of these women with respect to the way an intimate relationship was formed outside of arranged and forced marriage, and how this decision had a huge bearing on the process the women went through to leave the relationship when it became abusive. This research investigated how the women participating in the study navigated the socialisation of arranged marriage and expectations on them as women, and how this influenced their decisions to remain in, or leave, the violent and abusive relationship. It demonstrates that the women's experiences of leaving the relationship are mediated by the context of forming an intimate relationship, and shows that their autonomous decisions to form the relationship can become the very barrier to leaving the relationship. The voices of the women participants reflect the complex processes and negotiations that this cohort of women engaged in when leaving abusive partners. These were partners *they* chose, whether they acted against the wishes and norms of their family and culture or with their family's full support.

2. Forming Intimate Relationships

There are three main factors pertinent to marriage for women of South Asian heritage living in the UK. The first considers how women are socialised into marriage and specifically-arranged marriages. It highlights the fluid nature of arranged marriage, with the exception of one fixed entity, namely that of parents' involvement in the choice of partner. The second relates to how notions of honour and shame are gendered and thus shape expectations and conformity of women's behaviour. Honour and shame are some of the ways in which patriarchy control and power, the third factor, subjugate women when entering and leaving a marriage.

2.1. The Practice of Arranged Marriage in the UK

Dominant discourses construct the South Asian woman as a good wife and mother (Kallivayalil 2010), thus socialising women to value success in relationships at all costs can be a form of coercion (Anitha and Gill 2009). Scholars have highlighted the contrast between the individualistic notion of choosing one's own marriage partner and the family-based system of influence (Pande 2015; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002). Family-based systems include "arranged marriages" as a way of affirming an intimate relationship and this form of marriage is practiced by many diasporic communities in the UK including Middle Eastern, Turkish, African, Chinese, Japanese, and Jewish communities as well as those of South Asian heritage (Siddiqui 2003; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002). Arranged marriage can serve a societal objective to secure and preserve status within the family, kinship, and communities, and thus is "a key instrument for economic, social, and political stability in South Asian communities" (Bhopal 2011, p. 434). Partners are selected on the basis of caste, religion, family wealth, and status (Bhopal 2011). Parents or other family members take the lead role of administering and mediating the process and where and when prospective partners can be encouraged to meet each other.

Arranged marriage, along with many social norms, is not a fixed convention; it evolves and changes (Pande 2015; Siddiqui 2003). In her study of women of the Indian diaspora, (Bhopal 2011) found women negotiate and exercise "varying degrees of choice" of partner whilst still meeting criteria

of wealth and social status (Bhopal 2011). Gill and Harvey (2017) studied young British South Asian's attitudes and responses to arranged marriage, including the right to marry or not, and found that they arranged meetings between several prospective partners and parents, and then, in consultation with their parents, decided on the most suitable partner. Romantic love and arranged marriage are overlaid through the use of technology, where South Asian young people use internet dating to assess the suitability of a partner against criteria of race, religion, and social status (Chantler 2014).

The single fixed convention within the fluidity and evolving nature of arranged marriage is that of the involvement of parents or family members in the decision-making process in the choice of partner. In her study of British Indians' practices of arranged marriage, (Pande 2016, p. 391) points out the "significant choice allowed to them by their parents and family members". The word "allowed" is noteworthy. It exemplifies the power held by parents (and other family members) in not only the final decision of choice of partner, but also the amount of choice they sanction for their children. The significant role played by the family explains why an arranged marriage can provide a safeguard of family protection if a woman faces difficulties in the relationship (Mohee 2011). Women who have stepped outside social norms of arranged marriage and autonomously formed an intimate relationship of choice may not have this family safeguard.

2.2. Honour and Shame

Such protection by family members can represent women's socialisation and expectations of their own role as wife, mother and daughter. Gender-role expectations on women emphasise that the primary roles are to be a good wife and mother; in essence, women's socialisation of marriage (Kallivayalil 2010). For example, ensuring that successful careers outside the home do not upset the balance of power within the home between husband and wife (Oakley 2016). South Asian women can experience the (im)balance of power within the family and community as well as between the two partners (Patel 2003a).

Gendered socialisation is associated with the gendered nature of domestic violence such that "cultural traditions have always oppressed women while liberating men" (Patel 2003b, p. 249). Men are the decision-makers and protectors of the values that communities hold, whereas women "face very real consequences if they find themselves transgressing the norms of their community, whatever the reason" (Patel 2003b, p. 249). The importance of understanding the balance of power within a marriage, and in the community, is the way in which that power is manifested through the specific forms of socialisation called "honour" and "shame" (Patel 2003a).

Social constructs of honour encompass expectations of behaviour of family integrity, respect and pride, and transgressions of these expected traits of behaviour can bring shame on the family (Gill and Brah 2014; Toor 2009). Acts of behaviour that constitute dishonour include choosing an intimate partner for oneself (Sen 2005). Mitigating the consequences of honour can lead to dire consequences for women (Gill and Brah 2014; Sen 2005; Siddiqui 2013) such as forced marriage, ostracism from their family and community (Sen 2005), and even death (Siddiqui 2011). South Asian women's socialisation of behaviour according to family honour is thus relevant to women who have stepped outside social norms as they have not maintained the status quo and performed their expected roles within the community.

2.3. Patriarchy

Women's duty to serve the collective forms part of defending and maintaining patriarchy and gender inequality. A study conducted by (Gill and Harvey 2017) found that women were pressurised to conform to socially constructed traits of femininity, including putting the family's interests above their own. Women's experiences of violence occur "in a cultural context and that differences of culture should not lead to a denial of civil rights" (Patel 2003a, p. 176).

Human rights are enshrined in marriage within article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Men and women . . . are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its

dissolution" (United Nations 1948, p. 4). It follows that such rights are preserved in all intimate relationships and by the same token, the ability to leave a relationship. Feminists situate South Asian women's experiences of domestic violence within the context of gender inequality and thus human rights, and not as manifestations of culture or religion (Patel 2013; Siddiqui 2014, 2016).

South Asian women's specific experiences within patriarchal and structural constraints of marriage, divorce, and intimate relationships can be contested areas within families where patriarchal control and power determine the position of women, privilege men's status, and enforce control over women's bodies and lives (Anitha and Gill 2009; Wilson 2006). Patriarchy subjugates women in different ways and so the experience of oppression differs amongst women (Lorde 1996), and the historical and present context of race and class oppression faced by ethnic minority women is crucial to understanding how power relations work to subjugate women (Amos and Parmar 1984).

Patriarchal practices are not wholly a binary notion in which women either comply or do not. Women may negotiate "trade-offs" to protect their own interests, for example, choosing financial security that their partner provides for themselves and their children over leaving the relationship and plunging into poverty (Walby 1990). Some feminist scholars have argued that this recognition of negotiation is not attributed to all populations of women. Western liberal feminists, for example, have not always recognised how women of other cultures also negotiate everyday patriarchy within the limits and constraints they experience. It is crucial to recognise this negotiation and agency, and avoid portraying women from certain cultures as being wholly "prisoners" or "dupes" of patriarchy (Narayan 2001, p. 418).

Patriarchal forces and gendered social norms provide the backdrop for the complex and varied ways South Asian women may exercise agency and negotiation in the process of leaving abusive relationships. Such understandings are important to show the need for a conceptual framework that explicates South Asian women's lived experiences at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, and other inequalities, in order to gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of gendered socialisation of honour and shame and how power relations influence their agency in forming intimate relationships.

The three factors presented here are relevant and closely linked to women of South Asian heritage living in the UK, who choose their own intimate partners. By choosing their intimate partners, the South Asian women in this study appear to be transgressing such gendered norms. Their subsequent experiences of intimate partner violence within the relationship brings to the fore the consequences of their decisions where the act of choosing a partner becomes the barrier to leaving the abusive relationship. This paradox has received little attention within scholarship on intimate partner violence and specifically why women choose to remain or leave a violent and abusive relationship.

3. Research Design, Methodology and Methods

It is the knowledge gained from experiences of subjugation due to gender, age, sexuality and race that evokes critical social theory pertaining to black women. Social theories by Black Feminists reflect women's views of their lived experiences of multiple intersecting axes of oppression. Black Feminism incorporates knowledge and analysis of the ways in which structural power not only oppresses women, but also how different groups of black women are oppressed in different ways. Black Feminist Thought, as a "critical" social theory, underpins the development of "more specialized knowledge" that captures the contradictions of dominant ideologies and the lived experiences of black women (Collins 2000, p. 12). Examining women's experiences within the context of the social world they occupy, not only leads to an understanding of the power base that enforces structural inequalities on women's lives, but also an understanding of women's actions (Collins 2019). Black Feminism conceptualises the gendered structures of power and so informs the context of women's agency, but also elucidates the reasons for their actions.

A central tenet of this research is to give voice to South Asian women's experiences and thus to understand their social world. The core of Black Feminist Standpoint epistemology has been to

make visible previously erased Black women's narratives and place them on a par with Black men's and White women's narratives of oppression (Cho et al. 2013). Black Feminism was employed as the qualitative research approach, to give voice to South Asian women's experiences and provide an insight into the workings of gendered control and power when women are going through the process of leaving a violent and abusive relationship in the UK (Collins 2015; Gill 2004; Siddiqui 2016). Black Feminism pursues knowledge that emphasises the importance of understanding the context of women's lives, that is reflexive in approach "so that the scope, complexities and diversity of black women's lives can be successfully captured" (Reynolds 2002, p. 604). The centring of South Asian women's lives and theorising through the multiple social locations of ethnic identity, gender, age and socio-economic status offers new knowledge. This knowledge is not only of experiences of intimate partner abuse and familial violence, but also in conjunction with the understandings of the complexities behind decisions on whether to leave the abusive relationship or not. Thus Black Feminist Standpoint lends itself to the "angle of vision" (Collins 2000, p. 12) through which South Asian women see and live their world, from their perspectives, arising from their lived experiences of transgressing social norms by choosing their own intimate partner and of intimate partner and familial violence.

The empirical data presented in this paper were collected as part of a PhD research project that examined the lived experiences of South Asian women living in the UK who "choose" their intimate partners and explored their responses to familial and intimate partner violence. The data collection was undertaken in 2016 and at the time of the research, all participants lived in the UK. All the women had grown up with social norms of marriage that included arranged marriage, and all had transgressed such cultural practices to form an intimate relationship with a partner who was then violent and abusive in that relationship. In addition, some women also experienced familial violence.

After receiving ethical approval, participants were recruited through a mixture of using Facebook and professional networks. The Facebook posting included details of the research project with an emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were asked to use the direct message functionality to get in touch if they wished to engage with the research. Six participants were recruited this way. In total fifteen participants were recruited in four different ways. Figure 1 shows the breakdown.
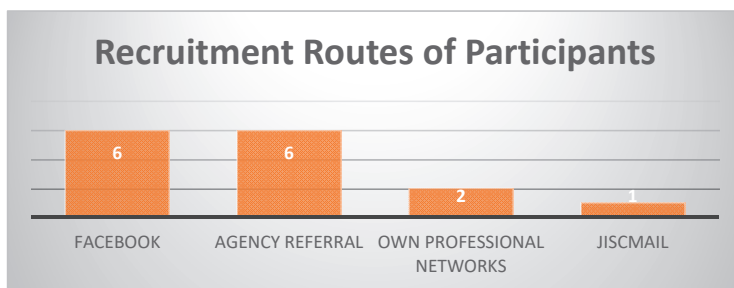

Figure 1. Recruitment routes of research participants.

The initial contact was followed up with a phone call to the participant to give more details concerning the research, the method of data collection and to emphasise the ethical procedures and reflexive position of the researcher. An informed consent form and participation information sheet were sent to each respondent prior to the interview. Of the fifteen participants interviewed, eleven were interviewed in one-to-one semi-structured interviews and the remaining four were interviewed in a group setting. The interviews were carried out between January and October 2016 and took place in a number of different locations as shown in Figure 2.
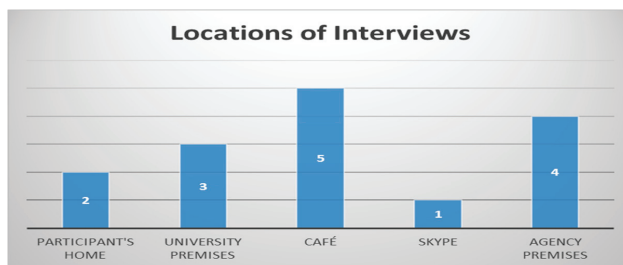
Figure 2. Location of interviews.

Most of the interviews were held in cafes chosen by the participant in the town or city where they lived. The group interview took place in a meeting room in the domestic violence agency's offices, referred to in Figure 2 as "agency premises". Two of the interviews were held in the participant's own homes and university ethical and safety guidelines were followed. On both occasions, the women were alone in their homes during the interview. One interview was held using voice over internet technology, Skype, because the participant lived some distance away and on a number of occasions an interview had been arranged but the participant had to cancel. Using Skype allowed her to cancel at short notice without wasting travelling time.

With the women's permission, all interviews were audio-recorded. They were in control of the audio recording and could switch off the recorder at any time during the interview. The participants' identities were anonymised for their safety. The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim (Braun and Clarke 2013). The group interview was undertaken in four different languages; Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and English. The researcher undertaking the group interview was fluent in Punjabi and English but less so in the other two and so an interpreter was commissioned to quality-check the final transcription. To stay true to the balance-of-power relations between researcher and researched (Letherby 2003), and so that the participants could participate in the final transcripts and have control over their content (Kelly 1988), the transcripts were sent to the participants and they were asked to review the content. The transcripts were coded to identify significant subject areas relevant to the research. Thematic analysis was applied. The codes were linked into identifying patterns that reflected themes such as "Relationship with parents" and linked together to produce thematic maps to visualise the codes within a theme and the different levels of themes in order to produce overarching themes with sub-themes under them (Braun and Clarke 2013). Significant themes emerged illustrating the complexity of women's experiences of forming intimate relationships and their decisions to stay or leave the relationships.

The ages of the participants at the time of the interviews ranged from twenty-three to fifty-seven years. Eight of the women were of Indian heritage, six of Pakistani heritage, and one of mixed Asian and African heritage. Of the eight women of Indian heritage, four were of the Sikh faith, two were Hindu, one was Christian, and one was Buddhist. Four of the women of Pakistani heritage were Muslim, one was of no faith, and one was an anti-theist[1]. The participant of mixed Asian and African heritage was Muslim.

The fifteen women had twenty-two children between them; three women had three children, six women had two children, one woman had one child and five women had no children from the relationships. One woman had an abortion, forced on her by her family.

The longest period a woman remained in her intimate relationship was twenty-five years, and the shortest time was nine months. Nine women were in relationships for five years or less. Five women experienced two abusive intimate relationships. Ten women had experienced both intimate partner

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[1]   An anti-theist opposes the belief that a God exists.

violence and familial violence, which is domestic violence from parents, siblings, or extended family members. Five women participants at the time of the research were still estranged from their families on account of choosing their own partners.

The experiences of the researcher at the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity have "bearings upon the relationship between the researcher and the researched" (Bhopal 2000, p. 73). The positionality of the researcher undertaking the fieldwork, as a gendered, racialised South Asian woman researcher, researching other South Asian women, was central to giving voice to women who otherwise may not be heard. Although the participants and the researcher shared South Asian heritage, there were differences in socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds, with differing immigration and British residency status. This reflected the heterogeneous, complex social and political positions we occupy, as researcher and research participants and as South Asian women in the UK today. At the same time, as a Black Feminist researcher researching intimate partner violence, the lead author found the shared gender, and racial identity led participants to reveal very intimate and traumatic experiences because of her experiences as a situated knower (Collins 2000).

4. Results

This section presents the results of the qualitative data collection. All of the women who participated in the research said that they had chosen their own partners and all had experienced intimate partner violence within their personal relationships. Only two had remained with their partners. All participants experienced complex negotiation and difficulties in leaving their partners; rooted in their decision to choose their partners and their fear of the consequences of their decisions. Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. These were women's sense of personal responsibility in choosing their partners; women stayed in relationships longer due to going against social norms; and their relationship with their parents. The themes highlight the many different barriers to leaving the relationship faced by these women. The women carried the "burden" of choosing their partners, which manifested when they looked to leave the abusive relationships. Women also stayed in the relationships longer because of this weight they carried. Women placed huge emotional investment in their relationship with their families, in particular their parents, whether their relationships had broken down with their parents or not. Each of these themes are explored in more detail below:

4.1. Women's Sense of Personal Responsibility in Choosing Their Partners

All research participants expressed a sense of a "burden" they were carrying because of their decision to marry or to be in a long-term relationship with a partner of their choice. This was a decision in conflict with the cultural expectations and norms of their family and community. Jazmin, a 24-year-old British born Muslim woman of Pakistani heritage who was in a long-term relationship with a Muslim man of Iranian descent, blamed herself for her decision and she blamed her partner for the breakdown of her relationship with her family.

> "Oh, it's like my fault because I chose him, and I wanted to be with him and cos of him I've been disowned" —Jazmin

Nirvair, a 29-year-old British born Sikh woman who married her husband, a Sikh Indian national, with her family's full support referred to the implications of the fact that the decision to marry her husband was hers solely.

> "It was me who went to them [her parents] and said, "I want to marry him". It wasn't them saying "You have to marry him" and I think for me personally it did. It was quite a big influence on everything." —Nirvair

Women participants also spoke about how they alone had to resolve the situation because of their decision to choose their intimate partner. Krishna, a 45-year-old Hindu woman with two children, felt it was her responsibility to resolve the situation with her abusive husband.

> *"I chose it. I'm the one who, who got myself into this and it's my job to put up with it not everybody else's job to get me out."* —Krishna

All the women expressed a huge sense of responsibility. This reflects an understanding of the wider implications they faced as a result of transgressing the social norm of arranged marriage and choosing their own partner. The women blamed themselves. They felt they would be judged and they had to resolve the situation without asking for any help from their families or others. The family did not play any role in choice of partner and so the women, now facing difficulties, did not feel they had the right to ask for protection (Mohee 2011).

4.2. Women Stayed in Relationships Longer

Choosing their own partners was a significant factor in understanding the consequences and deciding on whether to leave the partner they had chosen. Many women described how they stayed in abusive relationships longer than they wanted to and made special efforts to make the relationship work. Some women felt judged by society, felt that they were in the "wrong" and the fear of judgement led them to place importance on staying in their relationship over their own safety. Harjit is a 57-year-old British born Sikh woman who married a Sikh man. Harjit talked about her concerns about the personal costs of her decision to leave him. Harjit explains:

> *" . . . so, part of me thought "No I've got to stick it out and prove that I was right" or I won't be able to deal with erm, almost that, that personal shame of I went through all of that, did that, put my family through that and now I end up with this."* —Harjit

Other women felt that by choosing their partner themselves they had created the situation they found themselves in and so had to continue enduring the abuse from their partners. Their efforts to make the relationship work had the opposite effect. Jazmin stated

> *"I thought I can't [leave the relationship], I have to make it work so it's like that saying that they say, "you make your own bed, you lie in it" (laughs). So that's what I tried to do but it—the situation got way out of hand."* —Jazmin

Sara, a 36-year-old British born Muslim woman who was in a relationship with a man of Black Caribbean heritage also spoke about why she endured her partner's violence towards her.

> *"I chose to be with him and now I'm in this situation. I have to put up with it. I have to try and make it work."* —Sara

Women endured emotional, financial and physiological abuse as well as physical violence because they regarded their decision to choose their partner outweighed everything else. They reflected on their actions and accountability.

> *"I think choosing my own partner . . . made me feel like I had a responsibility to make that marriage work . . . I think if he didn't physically abuse me, I think I would have stuck it out . . . I tolerated it cos I just thought "You know you made the decision to be here" . . . and I think that influenced a lot of my poorly judged decisions at the time"* —Nirvair

Most of the participants endured one abusive intimate partner relationship. Four women experienced two such relationships where their first intimate relationships were forced marriages and then chose their own partners in the subsequent relationship. Two women experienced intimate partner violence in two relationships, where the perpetrators were partners they had chosen. This factor became significant, especially in the second relationship. Krishna explains.

> *"I felt ashamed of myself and especially when it happened second time, that's even worse you feel because then that's the reason I put up with it for eight years because I thought people won't believe me, again. "The story repeats again" that's what I said and now I joke around, and I said "You know what "One time wasn't enough, so I had to dive into a big sea again to feel the water"* —Krishna

Women stayed in the relationships longer to prove to their families and communities that their decisions were correct despite their departure from the social norm of arranged marriage. They put energy into making the relationships work because they did not want to be judged by society a second time for rejecting expectations of them to remain in the relationship. The women's accounts show the depth and influence of valuing success in relationships at all costs (Anitha and Gill 2009). The women's sense of honour and shame enforced such pressures to remain in the relationships at all costs (Siddiqui 2013). The gendered expectations and influence of honour and shame on women who have chosen their intimate partners, when negotiating whether to leave the abusive relationship are hitherto rarely explored within the academy.

4.3. Relationship with Parents

An emerging theme centred on how the women's relationships with their families fared as a result of their rejection of social norms to be in an intimate relationship with a person of their choice. All the women participants talked about the significance of their relationships with their families. The parents of six women were supportive throughout. Parental relationships broke down for the remaining nine, and of these four women were still isolated from their parents at the time of the fieldwork. Their relationships with their parents and siblings were important to them, the bond they had with their families and the personal costs of strong ties with families being severed because of their decision to be in an intimate relationship with a person of their own choosing was devastating to them. Harjit referred to the fear that her family would spurn her on finding out her relationship had broken down.

> "I certainly was erm, almost afraid of a second rejection if that makes sense, in that was I going to be told "Well, you know, you're the one who made that decision? You're the one who erm, decided it". or whatever and I certainly missed being able to share what was going on, but I didn't feel that I could for fear of being told "well, no it was your decision" —Harjit

The close ties of family relationships also manifested in women's reflections of disclosing the abuse to their parents. Samia expressed how momentous an occasion it was:

> "I think it was actually one of the hardest things was to tell my mother what had been happening because I had, I'd chosen him" —Samia

Samia felt the size and the gender of her family members factored into how she weighed up the risks and consequences of choosing her partner and the consequences of how many family members she had to tell.

> " . . . I mean for me in a way I only had my mother with whom I wasn't getting on. I had no other family really. I had nothing. All I had was rubbish. I mean I don't mean that—it's just bad you know and to lose my mother was erm was bad . . . but I've talked to other women who are in similar situation and they couldn't make the choices" —Samia

In addition to the size of the family, women found their mothers and fathers responded differently. Pania, a 31-year-old Muslim woman of African and Indian heritage with two children aged 3 and 4 years said.

> "So, I do speak to my mum and she's really humble, really. She's forgiven me. She's, she's okay and I'm quite relieved but my father, no, no, no, no for him . . . still my father is, I think, is very angry . . . He (Pania's father) says to him[self] I'm a dead person. He doesn't wanna know anything about me . . . It's like I've killed everything in him," —Pania

Some women felt a sense of betrayal and were angry at their parents' lack of support and the subsequent isolation they felt from their families. As their offspring, women felt they deserved support. Kiran describes how she regarded her parents' response to her situation and her expectations of them:

> *"My parents may not have wanted to support me but to completely remove contact? ... my situation was so bad, it's because of that, that I left and thought they would come round. My husband was hitting me, and it wasn't that they came and cried that their daughter is being treated so badly. Support is about "this is my daughter. She's our blood and we'll care for her and help. So, she made a mistake, never mind." But no "she made a mistake so leave her. She made a mistake, leave her." That's what they said to me. The whole blame is on me."* —Kiran

Women also experienced isolation from their wider community. Krishna describes the comments people made when she attended local community events after splitting up from her husband.

> *"I was blacklisted in the whole Indian community. No one would talk to me. I was a bad person and they'll start saying in the public places ... "Do you know what if you want to kick your mother-in-law out and your husband out ... come over because ... she will give people training" and err I thought that was horrible of Indian community not understanding you. What woman is going through deep down"* —Krishna

As well as the community, partners also exploited women's isolation and estrangement from their families further entrenching women's sense of being completely alone. Sara gave an example of the verbal abuse she received from her partner, which became a factor in her staying in the relationship longer.

> *""Your family didn't care about you. They didn't support you." Basically, I had to put up with whatever was thrown at me ... It was my choice, I did this. I chose to be with him and now I'm in this situation. I have to put up with it. I have to try and make it work."* —Sara

Not all of the participants' relationships with their parents had deteriorated. Some women described the emotional support and response they received from their parents. Renaisha is a 38-year-old woman of Indian heritage who has two children aged 14 and 12. She described her parents' response to her when she told them about the domestic violence she had suffered for 17 years.

> *" ... my parents didn't know for seventeen years but when they realised they were extremely supportive. "No, you don't deserve a life like this. You need to leave ... This is not a marriage. This is not what marriage is." ... Amazingly, (starts crying) I think that the first thing I, I was expecting to hear from my mum and dad that "we had told you" and I was shocked and to this day they have never mentioned it."* —Renaisha

Renaisha was not expecting the reaction she received from her parents. Other women such as Krishna and Anita received mixed messages from their parents and overall found their parents to be supportive:

> *"I cried so much to my mom over the phone and I said "Mom, I don't know what to do." I didn't go into details with my mom. I said, "Mom I can't live in this abuse anymore" and my mom goes "I told you not to go." She said "It doesn't matter I'm still here for you, we're all here for you. Why did you put up with it second time? We told you not to put up with any abuses"* —Krishna

Others simply did not want to offer an opportunity for their parents to add to abuse their partners. Anita, a 31-year-old woman of Pakistani heritage explained.

> *"I never told my parents about that relationship because erm it was—there was nothing in that relationship worth telling my parents for ... actually the last thing you want is someone to sit there and slag off your partner to you"* —Anita

Parental involvement regardless of level of participation remains significant within the arranged marriage practice (Pande 2015). The women in this study did not involve their parents in their decision-making. However, the women's responses show that both they and their parents are socialised in the practice of arranged marriage and both are negotiating changes to this cultural norm as a

consequence of the women choosing their own partners. The power imbalances within families remain, illustrated by the way women expected their parents to behave, wanted them to behave, or were surprised by their responses. There is a gap in the literature that looks at the relationship between women and their parents when women have chosen their own partners and their subsequent experiences of domestic abuse within the intimate relationship.

5. Discussion—"Should I Stay, or Should I Go?"—Barriers to Leaving

Black Feminism provides the lens to understand and analyse the complexity of South Asian women's decision making when faced with a violent intimate relationship when they have chosen their own intimate partners. It is through the centring of women's voices and deconstructing their responses that an understanding of the context of their lives comes about (Cho et al. 2013). The angle of vision spotlights the lack of protection the women experience from families and face ostracism and isolation as a consequence of transgressing the cultural norm of arranged marriage (Bano 2010; Siddiqui 2016; Thiara 2013). Black feminists have highlighted the cultural and gendered contexts of honour and shame that situate South Asian women's experiences of both familial and intimate partner violence as violations of human rights (Patel 2013; Siddiqui 2014, 2016).

The women's responses suggest that the agentic act of choosing a partner became the key influencing factor in their decisions whether to remain or leave the violent and abusive intimate relationship. Women referred to having to "prove" to their families they had made the "right" decision and could make the "right" decision by enduring many more years of the abusive relationship than they would have done in a relationship approved and sanctioned by their family. Their agency in forming the intimate relationship became the very barrier to exercising agency to leave the violent relationship; a paradox. An arranged marriage would have been seen as a collaborative decision with responsibilities shared between the woman and her family and with familial support if the relationship faltered (Gill and Harvey 2017, p. 85). In her study of South Asian Muslim women negotiating marriage and their identities, (Mohee 2011) found that some women did not choose their own partners because they would lose the protection of their families if those marriages did not work out and also they could not attach blame to their parents. In contrast, the women in this study did not have this "safety net" because their intimate relationships were not a collaborative family decision but an individual choice. The connection between family support and arranged marriage shows how the barrier to leaving the violent relationship comes about and how women's vulnerability stems from not having complied with social norms.

The women remained in relationships for longer periods in order to try to convince themselves and their families that they were originally justified in forming the intimate relationship of choice and thus transgress the cultural norms of arranged marriage. Fearing a second rejection, staying in the relationship longer, and fearing judgement from the community and family, all point to a desire to prevent further experiences of conflict with the family, stemming from pressures to maintain patriarchy through the gendered nature of dishonour and shame. Thus demonstrating the pressure women continued to feel to conform to social constructs of honour and shame despite transgressing social practice of arranged marriage; another paradox.

The women themselves considered their agentic act of choosing their own partners as one of transgression. They could not separate out the act of choosing a partner from the socialisation of arranged marriage and associated honour and shame. Having chosen their partners they continued to be enmeshed in the sense of dishonour and shame they had brought onto their family as a result of their rejection of cultural norms concerning intimate relationships (Sen 2005). Furthermore, the breakdown of the relationships gave credence to the belief that choosing partners outside of arranged marriage is flawed. Such violation of patriarchal power in turn gave legitimacy to the domestic violence against them by both their families and their partners (Siddiqui 2013). The belief systems are so entrenched that the women, despite being victims, punish and blame themselves for the domestic abuse they experienced (Kelly 1988). Thus, the threats of losing respectability in the community (Siddiqui 2013)

and being ostracised from the family (Bano 2010) are just as powerful when leaving a relationship, especially an abusive one, as when forming it.

The women chose their partners amidst power imbalances within their families. Power relations within the family, including parents, siblings, and extended family members, and community pressure can leave women vulnerable and with no or little power as agentic subjects (Anitha and Gill 2009; Wilson 2006). Harjit's phrase "I went through all of that, did that, put my family through that and now I end up with this" reflects multiple, complex and contradictory layers of agency and negotiation of cultural norms (Anitha and Gill 2009; Wilson 2006). Such differential power portrays how women can perceive a mother's power over them as well as that of their partners (Yuval-Davis 2011). Women's responses to power varied depending on whether their mothers or intimate partners were exercising power over them. They applied a differential factor; they were still beholden to their mothers in a way they were not to their partners. A socially constructed trait of expected behaviour on women is to put their family's interests above their own (Gill and Harvey 2017). Fear of rejection from a mother was greater than from a partner.

Women participants recognised that only having women members of the family to answer to was safer than where there were both men and women family members. Patriarchal control and power determine the status of women, privilege men's status, and enforce control over women's lives (Anitha and Gill 2009; Wilson 2006). This can also be extended to the women's expectations towards their fathers as the patriarchal head of the family—an internalisation of gendered norms. Such gendered differences amongst parents reflect power imbalances between mothers and fathers and the expected gendered norms of marriage (Patel 2003b). Fathers, as patriarchs, are conduits of those expectations and have the power to decide who, and who is not, part of the family. By ostracising and isolating their daughters, as though they never existed and had no right to be part of the family because of shame they had brought on the family, fathers redeem honour in the community (Sen 2005). The ultimate consequence for a daughter and the show of power by the father is to cut the daughter off from her family.

The conformity to socially constructed traits of gender meant that Harjit put her family's interests above her own, in the negotiation to leave the abusive relationship (Gill and Harvey 2017). Harjit's choice of partner was both inside and outside culturally expected norms. Marrying someone of the same religious and cultural background placed her within cultural and gendered expectations. However, marrying someone outside of the arranged marriage practice and in extreme public defiance of her mother placed Harjit and her mother outside of cultural and gendered norms. Mothers are held responsible for their daughters' transgressions in the eyes of the community (Bhopal 2011). As well as the acts themselves, it is the public knowledge of such violations of "izzat" that causes families to experience "sharam" and dishonour in the face of the community (Toor 2009). With the community knowing about the women's perceived transgressions and the women's fear of being judged by their community, the women stayed in the relationships longer than they would have had they had an arranged marriage. The women had been judged once already. They remained in the abusive relationship longer because they feared further ostracism, shame, and stigma within the family and community (Thiara 2013) in addition to the ostracism, shame and stigma they were experiencing because they had formed intimate relationships. Control and power over the women extended into the public sphere (the community) as well as the private sphere (family and intimate partner). Women feared shame both within the family and outside of it. The women may have broken social norms by marrying their partners of choice but they were still tied to cultural beliefs of codes of honour and were punished by others (Chakravarti 2005; Coomaraswamy 2005; Siddiqui 2005) and at the same time castigated themselves. Their penalty, along with their admonishment, was to stay in the relationship longer. The women felt they did not deserve the support of their families; but were also resisting social norms, beholden to and influenced by them at the same time (Mahmood 2005).

The women's resilience was realised in surviving the everyday realities of domestic violence from their chosen intimate partner and convincing themselves to remain within the relationship. Leaving

the relationship (and thereby resisting intimate partner domestic violence) in many cases led to further isolation and abuse from their parents, siblings, and extended family, as well as the intimate partner. Responses to domestic violence and abuse within different relationships and at different times can seem contradictory in nature. The context of women's survival and their negotiation within and in relation to violent relationships is complex (Patel 2003b). Leaving one oppressive relationship can be exploited and lead to further subjugation from a subsequent oppressive relationship. Intimate partner perpetrators can subjugate women, who have left previous violence and abusive familial or intimate partner relationships.

Parental support of women in itself also became a barrier to women disclosing the abuse to their parents. Renaisha stayed in her marriage for 17 years, experiencing domestic violence and abuse, before finally telling her parents. The enforcement of honour carried out by families can be pervasive in nature and result in severe consequences for women (Patel 2003b). The opposite is the redemption of honour, saving women from the "sin" of transgressing social norms where families "forgive" the women and are supportive. This too became a barrier to women leaving the relationship. Renaisha's prolonged hesitancy to disclose the violence she was experiencing to her family illustrates the deep entrenchment of the socialisation of arranged marriage and honour and shame. She feared that by admitting that her relationship was a "failure", she would evidence her poor decision making in the eyes of her family and community.

By choosing their own intimate partners, the women rejected the societal objective to secure and preserve status within the family, kinship, and communities (Bhopal 2011). However, the women were not immune to the social constructs of honour and expectations on them to preserve family honour, respect and pride (Gill and Brah 2014; Toor 2009) even after contravening the social norm of arranged marriage. Faced with consequences such as ostracism from family and community (Gill and Brah 2014; Sen 2005; Siddiqui 2013) they stayed in abusive relationships longer. Women's experiences of patriarchal constraints within families showed how contested the area of intimate relationships are within families to ultimately control women's bodies and lives (Anitha and Gill 2009; Wilson 2006). The result was that the very act of choosing their own intimate partner became the barrier to leaving the abusive relationship. This paper has added to the literature on domestic violence to show how gendered norms and expectations of South Asian women when forming an intimate relationship also apply to when they leave a violent relationship, despite transgressing social norms.

6. Conclusions

This paper examined South Asian women's experiences of leaving a violent and abusive intimate relationship where the women had transgressed social norms to form an intimate relationship outside of family sanctioned and arranged marriages. The anonymised participant quotes that have been presented in this paper have been chosen because their narratives demonstrate the complexity of their decision-making and processes of negotiation navigated by the participants to leave their violent relationships. They also highlight the diversity of experiences within the process of leaving the violent relationship, including their responses to family and community pressures. The consequences of choosing their own partners became even more apparent to the women when they experienced intimate partner violence and especially as their families had not been supportive of their choice of intimate partner.

The women added one bad decision on top of another to prove to their families and communities that they were "right" in their choice of partner. They disagreed with the community telling them they were mistaken to choose their partner and they disagreed with the community telling them they were wrong when their relationship was abusive.

Regardless of whether the parents were supportive of the relationship or not, all women in this cohort endured violent relationships to try to make them work. The very act of choosing an intimate partner became the barrier to leaving the relationship, regardless of whether their families were supportive or not. All women stayed in the relationships longer than they wanted to because

leaving the relationship was to admit to their families and the community that they had been a "failure" and that society was "right" all along.

Gender inequality manifested through cultural notions of honour and shame, together with experiences of power and control, subjugated the women. The complexity of these women's agency reflected the multi-layered responses where women were resisting intimate partner violence and abuse and also responding to gendered norms and expectations from their families and communities. Furthermore, it emerged that partners exploited women's vulnerability and isolation from their immediate family. Their agency in forming the relationship can result in isolation from the family and so they become more susceptible to vulnerability to the intimate partner. Women's socialisation of marriage and specifically arranged marriage situates the women within prescribed notions of gendered norms and behaviour.

Researching South Asian women's experiences of departing social norms and cultural traditions by choosing their own partners widens our understanding and knowledge on the subject of intimate partner violence in general. It shows why women's agency at one point in time may become a barrier to a later act is applicable to other aspects of intimate partner violence. By considering this paradox, researching intimate partner violence informs us of the importance of researching the complexity behind women's decisions to leave or remain in an abusive relationship. What on the surface may be women conforming to social norms requires of us, as researchers, to explore deeper and understand the context of what may seem to be contradictory subsequent actions. Only then can we truly provide the angle of vision that is true to the context of women's lives.

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Article

Assessing Organizational Cultural Responsiveness among Refugee-Servicing Domestic Violence Agencies

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Abstract: Refugee community members who have experienced domestic violence in the U.S. face complex challenges in seeking help which may ultimately impact their ability to leave violent relationships. When domestic violence organizations are not prepared to serve them in culturally responsive ways, these challenges are exacerbated. This study surveyed 70 executive directors of domestic violence agencies in U.S. resettlement cities about the extent to which their organization's practices reflected cultural responsiveness in serving refugee populations. The results showed promising indicators of organizational cultural responsiveness but uncovered numerous areas for growth. In particular, the study results underscore the need for organizations to improve their language supports and take active steps to outreach to, hire, and engage refugee communities in order to better them. This paper makes recommendations for how DV agencies can be more culturally responsive as they support refugee individuals who are seeking safety from violent relationships.

Keywords: refugees; domestic violence; cultural competence; organizational cultural responsiveness; diverse populations

1. Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a serious, global public health issue with long-term negative impacts on individuals, families, and societies (World Health Organization 2017). Domestic violence does not discriminate by income, race/ethnicity, nationality, belief system, gender, age, ability, or any other identity group. Although DV does not appear to be any more prevalent among refugees than it is among the general population, refugees experience unique challenges that might exacerbate their violent experience, make it difficult to seek help, and ultimately, impact their ability to leave a violent relationship (Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Runner et al. 2009).

Since 1980, approximately 3 million refugees have been resettled in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2019). In the last decade, refugees from Burma, Iraq, and Bhutan have been the largest groups resettled in the U.S.'s 212 resettlement cities and more recently, refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia have resettled in larger numbers (Blizzard and Batalova 2019). Although the last few years have witnessed stark declines in refugee resettlement numbers in the U.S., the number of refugees globally is at a historic high (Pew Research Center 2019). Refugee communities should not be viewed as monolithic—each community has diverse sociocultural characteristics. Nevertheless, a unifying theme among newly resettled refugees is the difficulty they often experience in system navigation and help-seeking. For refugees affected by DV, challenges related to language, culture, migration and trauma histories, and gender roles all coalesce to make DV system navigation more difficult and help-seeking less likely (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Crandall et al. 2005; Latta and

Goodman 2005; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005). For example, refugees may experience challenges communicating with the police or social service providers, navigating a complex legal system, or filling out any required paperwork along the way (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Crandall et al. 2005; Latta and Goodman 2005; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Ortiz Hendricks 2009; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005). Newly resettled refugees may not understand their rights in a U.S. context and may fear deportation of their partner if they disclose or report. Compounding these challenges, research shows that human service providers in the U.S. are often uncertain of how to effectively engage and intervene with the refugee community (Daniels and Belton 2015). If refugees face significant challenges in seeking help from formal DV service providers *and* service providers do not know how to support them, refugees who have been victimized by their partners may find it particularly difficult to leave a violent relationship and find safety. It is critical that DV service providers recognize the unique experiences and challenges that refugees face, develop and adapt programs that are culturally responsive, and actively outreach to refugee communities in order to more effectively serve this special population.

Given the growing refugee population in the U.S., there is a need among DV agencies to better understand how to effectively serve refugee survivors. Although there is a growing body of literature related to culturally responsive service provision in health contexts, there is very little empirical work that directly informs culturally responsive service provision in domestic violence contexts, specifically focused on refugee populations. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to assess culturally responsive organizational practices among domestic violence agencies in U.S. resettlement cities in an attempt to gain a baseline understanding of organizational cultural responsiveness and inform future service provision and research.

2. Background

2.1. Needs of Refugee and Immigrant Survivors

A small number of qualitative studies have explored the experiences, concerns, and greatest needs related to domestic violence among refugee communities, but a larger literature explores the same among immigrant communities in the U.S. The term refugee is often used interchangeably with the terms migrant or undocumented immigrant; however, the legal definition of refugee is qualitatively different from that of undocumented immigrant. Although refugees and undocumented immigrants experience similar traumatic trajectories brought on by persecution, war, or violence, in resettlement countries, refugees have legal status whereas undocumented immigrants do not. It is essential to understand the implications of this important difference and, even more, recognize that groups within either of these categories are not culturally monolithic. That said, the literature demonstrates considerable overlap in risk and contextual factors for refugees and immigrants and thus, we review the literature with this in mind.

There is a robust body of literature that identifies language as one of the primary areas of concern in DV situations as it affects both their experience with DV and their ability to seek help (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Crandall et al. 2005; Latta and Goodman 2005; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005). Some abusers use language as a means of control, discouraging or preventing women from learning English and thus, further isolating them from potential sources of help (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005; Runner et al. 2009). Additionally, women who are not fluent in English experience barriers at every turn when they seek help for their abusive situation. They may have trouble communicating with the police or social service providers, navigating a complex legal system, or filling out required paperwork (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Crandall et al. 2005; Latta and Goodman 2005; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Ortiz Hendricks 2009; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005). Combined with cultural and societal views of DV in the refugee survivor's country of origin, these language issues help to explain why many refugee and immigrant survivors lack awareness of domestic violence laws and available services, as well

as their challenges in seeking help (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Crandall et al. 2005; Latta and Goodman 2005; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Ortiz Hendricks 2009; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005; Runner et al. 2009).

Research suggests that these challenges can be mitigated by culturally responsive practices (Bhuyan et al. 2005; Crandall et al. 2005; Latta and Goodman 2005; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Ortiz Hendricks 2009; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005; Runner et al. 2009). Refugees and immigrants recommend that agencies should provide translation and interpretation services and have someone familiar with the cultural background of their clients. Additionally, community outreach and education should be a priority, both to inform women about available services and to educate men about domestic violence laws in the U.S. Additionally, refugees and immigrants indicate that services to help them become more independent and adapt to living in the U.S would help support their exit from violent relationships. This could include assistance with obtaining a driver's license, finding employment, becoming more proficient in the English language, understanding the legal system, and accessing other services to help them and their families. This body of research is particularly important as it centers the perspectives of refugee and immigrant survivors and helps guide practical and theoretical work in the domain of culturally responsive service provision.

2.2. Cultural Responsiveness and Refugee Survivors

Cultural responsiveness is a critical factor and essential framework for providing relevant and effective services across multiple systems of care. Most health and social service systems are not inherently culturally responsive; however, evidence shows that when interventions within these systems are culturally adapted, they work better than non-adapted interventions and produce better outcomes for diverse populations (Bernal and Domenech-Rodriguez 2012). Beyond culturally adapted programs and interventions, Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar (2014) contend that culturally competent staff who administer programs from within a culturally responsive organizational climate are best positioned to serve the diverse needs of underrepresented groups. Their work reinforces Pyles and Kim (2005) study that highlighted the need for DV agencies specifically to adopt agency and system levels of cultural competence in order to best serve the needs of underserved DV survivors. This work is grounded in the idea that cultural competence is a multi-level phenomenon that must exist beyond the micro-level of service provider–survivor interaction.

There is an overwhelming literature base on cultural competence. For example, Shen (2015) review of cultural competence in the field of nursing identified 15 separate but overlapping models of cultural competence. Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar (2014) work integrates these disparate models and provides a heuristic way of understanding how cultural competence influences organizations. Extending Pyles and Kim (2005) and Hyde (2004) work on organizational cultural competence, they identify three levels (i.e., organizational, staff, and program) to characterize this framework and promote ongoing awareness, knowledge, and skill development for people serving the organization. Specific strategies for enacting cultural competence within these levels are based on substantial theoretical and empirical work across disciplines (see Georgetown University National Center for Cultural Competence 2020). According to Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar (2014), organizational cultural responsiveness helps agencies and providers develop and deliver more culturally appropriate services to diverse clients and can make those clients feel more comfortable with the service provider. By contrast, clients may feel misunderstood or even discriminated against when services are not culturally responsive, and this can discourage individuals and even entire communities from seeking needed services. Thus, cultural responsiveness is of special concern when working with refugee survivors of domestic violence.

2.2.1. Level 1: Culturally Competent Organizational Climate

Supported by the cognitive and behavioral cultural competence of staff, organizational leaders often begin by creating a mission and vision statement that embraces diverse and multicultural practices. These mission and vision statements drive corresponding action plans to ensure

organizational accountability and might include a variety of practices including cultural competence training, recruitment/promotion/retention of diverse staff, mentoring, translation/interpretation services, coordination of health/social workers, and inclusion of family members. Being culturally competent at an organizational level might also include policies and practices that facilitate the support of outreach and information dissemination in ways that are transparent and inclusive (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014). In the context of the present study, the organization's relationship with refugee communities is of special consideration, and agencies should collaborate with community advisers to examine issues, problem solve solutions, and evaluate the cultural fit of the strategies being implemented (Dana et al. 1992; Ortiz Hendricks 2009; Runner et al. 2009).

2.2.2. Level 2: Culturally Competent Staff and Service Providers

Just as staff can support a culturally competent organizational environment, so too can the environment foster increased competence among staff members. At this level, people are asked to think about how the organization's mission and vision interplays with their own personal beliefs, values, and attitudes. This look inwards might include comparing and contrasting practices of different cultural groups, taking an inventory of one's own explicit and implicit biases, and exploring one's capacity to serve culturally diverse clients. The integration of the cognitive and behavioral dimensions might be reflected in actions such as active listening or the asking of questions to gain knowledge about how best to support diverse families' health and wellbeing goals (Purnell 2002). In sum, culturally competent staff are those who have taken the time to immerse themselves in the cultural norms, communication practices, and celebrations of the people for whom they serve (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014). These culturally responsive staff and service providers contribute to the overall cultural responsiveness of the organization itself because they are part of the organizational climate and have the potential to advocate for programs and services that better serve the specific population or group with whom they are working (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014).

2.2.3. Level 3: Culturally Adapted/Responsive Programs and Evaluation

Finally, the implementation and evaluation of adapted programs illustrate the cultural competence of a well-supported organization and staff. Specifically, adapted programs are those that take into consideration the language, patterns of behavior, and cultural values of diverse families (e.g., translation, incorporating cultural values, offering childcare; Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014). Existing research supports the value of these adaptations and suggests they have more efficacy than non-adapted programs (Bernal and Domenech-Rodriguez 2012). Scholars, however, warn against adapting programs that focus on specific characteristics of an ethnic group, promoting instead adaptations made based on theory and existing evidence-based programs that have been previously successful (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014). In particular, the literature consistently identifies language services as being especially critical (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014; Dana et al. 1992; Ortiz Hendricks 2009; Purnell et al. 2011; Runner et al. 2009). This is consistent with the need for language services as identified by refugee domestic violence survivors. Runner et al. (2009) asserted that language is such a paramount issue that even if agencies only used their limited funds to provide communication services, it would be of great benefit to their refugee and immigrant clients. Because understanding the efficacy of adaptation has such practical implications (i.e., whether that adaptation will be used again or in other contexts), evaluation becomes essential. Specifically, these evaluations should hold programs to standards that reflect cultural competence using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar 2014).

2.3. Present Study

Previous research has outlined the unique risks and cultural considerations for refugees who have experienced domestic violence. Much of this research is qualitative and offers valuable insight from refugee survivors. These insights point to the practices and policies that agencies and helping

professionals could enact to better serve diverse communities. Although there is a growing body of literature that underscores the importance of culturally responsive practices, little to no research exists that estimates the extent to which domestic violence organizations in the U.S. are enacting culturally responsive practices in their service provision for refugees. Thus, with Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar's assessment tool in mind, the current study's purpose is to assess culturally responsive organizational practices among domestic violence agencies in U.S. resettlement cities. Specifically, we ask:

(1) To what extent are domestic violence agencies in resettlement cities across the U.S. enacting culturally responsive practices for refugee survivors;
(2) What agency characteristics are associated with self-reported culturally competent practices within domestic violence agencies?

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

The present study represents a cross-sectional assessment of domestic violence organizations in U.S. resettlement cities. A comprehensive list of domestic violence organizations in every resettlement city in the U.S. was identified using the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's (NCADV) state-by-state online search tool. According to the U.S. Department of State, there are 212 resettlement cities in the United States. Resettlement cities were the geographic target because agencies in these locales were more likely to have some familiarity with refugee communities. In total, we identified 301 domestic violence organizations in these 212 resettlement cities. Only agencies who operated shelter services were included in the sampling frame. Executive director emails were obtained via web searches and by calling organizations for confirmation. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the online survey was sent to all 301 identified executive directors. Approximately 24 emails bounced, bringing the total sampling frame to 277 domestic violence organizations. In total, 78 individuals responded to the survey on behalf of their agency following 2 reminder emails over the course of 6 weeks. Of these 78 responses, 70 were valid and complete. Ultimately, we obtained a 28% response rate—low numbers likely due in part to the heavy workload of executive directors and the hesitance of these individuals to speak as experts on the survey topic. In the end, DV agencies from resettlement cities in 31 states responded to the survey, demonstrating a wide range of geographic diversity. It is important to note that the sampling frame represents DV agencies in resettlement cities only, and not a national sample of DV agencies more broadly.

3.2. Sample

The sampling unit for this study was the domestic violence organization; however, we also collected key information from the executive director of each organization. On average, the organizations surveyed have served their communities for 46 years (*SD* = 25.1), employ a median of 28 employees, and receive support from 48 volunteers at any given time. The organizations surveyed provide support for a median of 950 clients each year, with a median of 20 who reportedly come from refugee communities. Refer to Table 1 for additional agency characteristics.

Table 1. Agency Characteristics.

Agency Characteristic	Median
Number of Paid Staff	27.5
Number of Volunteers	47.5
Number of Clients Served Annually	950
Number of Refugee Clients Served Annually	20
Annual Operating Budget	USD 1,600,000
Annual Translation Services Budget	USD 1100

3.3. Instrumentation

The research team developed the survey collaboratively with expert consultants from the International Women's House (IWH) in Atlanta, Georgia. IWH has been operating for more than 20 years, providing a safe haven and supportive services for women and children who are victims of family violence, sexual abuse, and human trafficking and focusing specifically on serving immigrant and refugee women and children with cultural sensitivity. In addition, Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar (2014) model of cultural responsiveness was used to develop assessment questions that queried the executive directors of domestic violence organizations regarding their organization's culturally responsive practices across system levels. Upon Institutional Review Board approval, the survey was administered to executive directors via a Qualtrics online survey. Overall, the survey consisted of 77 questions, some of which were open-ended, and most of which were Likert scale questions related to the frequency with which various culturally responsive policies, practices, and approaches were enacted in the agency. Finally, the survey collected demographic and background information from the executive director and the agency itself.

The majority of survey questions that assessed agency cultural responsiveness fell into the following six domains: (1) agency values and practices (9 items, $\alpha = 0.903$); (2) agency staffing and programmatic practices (9 items, $\alpha = 0.899$); (3) interagency collaboration and outreach (6 items, $\alpha = 0.783$); (4) agency systems and processes for assessment (4 items, $\alpha = 0.846$); (5) program and shelter accommodations and adaptations (5 items, $\alpha = 0.688$); and (6) agency approaches to language concerns (9 items, $\alpha = 0.714$). These Likert scale questions were developed using Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar's assessment tool in consultation with IWH expert input. For bivariate analyses, single items in each domain were averaged to reflect a composite score. High levels of reliability indicate the appropriateness of treating these domains as larger constructs for correlation analyses. Specific items can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Culturally Responsive Organizational Practices Domains.

My Agency …	M	SD
Agency Values and Practices (α = 0.903)		
purchases resources (e.g., books, training materials, etc.) that create a culture of learning about the refugee community.	2.61	0.931
staff are knowledgeable of the cultural practices, values, and norms in the refugee community that may impact help-seeking among refugee victims of intimate partner violence.	3.16	0.792
actively outreaches to the refugee community to improve attitudes and social norms regarding intimate partner violence.	2.82	0.962
actively develops domestic violence leaders/advocates from within the refugee community.	2.06	0.956
forms collaborative partnerships with the refugee community.	2.98	0.924
works with consultants, such as culture specific healers or cultural brokers, who have in-depth knowledge of the refugee community.	2.34	0.961
engages in advocacy work within the refugee community.	2.72	1.051
depicts refugee clients in promotional materials.	2.42	1.012
displays decor and/or artwork from refugee communities in agency spaces.	2.16	1.037
Agency Staffing and Programmatic Practices (α = 0.899)		
recruits bicultural and bilingual staff.	3.43	0.816
mentors bicultural and bilingual staff.	3.23	0.973
promotes bicultural and bilingual staff.	3.31	0.903
hires staff specifically from the refugee community to help with engagement and outreach.	2.12	0.971
encourages staff to engage in cultural immersion in the refugee community.	2.45	1.1
hosts multicultural events to promote cultural immersion in the refugee community.	2.08	0.954
creates opportunities for ongoing dialogue for staff to reflect on what is and what is not working when serving refugee individuals.	2.81	1.065
participates in interagency forums to reflect on what is and what is not working when serving refugee individuals.	2.71	0.988
provides formal, ongoing cultural competence training for staff.	2.96	1.031
Inter-Agency Relationships and Outreach Programs (α = 0.783)		
actively works to build relationships with other DV service providers with expertise in issues that affect refugee clients.	3.45	0.765
actively outreaches to police to educate and develop coordinated care for the refugee community.	2.46	1.091
actively outreaches to medical providers to educate and develop coordinated care for the refugee community.	2.19	1.045
actively outreaches to faith leaders from the refugee community to improve their responses to intimate partner violence in their congregations.	2.39	0.953
actively partners with Refugee Services Offices (e.g., Catholic Charities, etc.)	3.06	0.998

My Agency . . .	M	SD
Agency Systems and Processes for Assessment (α = 0.846)		
implements systems of accountability for cultural competence standards when working with refugee populations.	2.42	1.048
engages in assessment of cultural competence practices (e.g., collecting feedback from refugee clients).	2.77	1.171
engages in needs assessments of the refugee community.	2.17	1.098
uses culturally-relevant screening and assessment tools that have been adapted for the refugee community.	2.25	1.082
Program and Shelter Accommodations and Adaptations (α = 0.688)		
provides dietary accommodations for refugee families in shelter.	1.22	0.56
offers multiple religious accommodations for refugee families in shelter.	1.3	0.594
has established partnerships with legal service providers who have experience in working with the refugee community.	1.15	0.461
has established partnerships with health care providers who have experience in working with the refugee community.	1.33	0.663
partners with or employs mental health providers who are trained in trauma-informed care with refugee populations.	1.27	0.61
Agency Approaches to Language Concerns (α = 0.714)		
provides translated hard copy materials in an array of refugee languages.	2.71	0.922
staff take measures to verbally convey necessary content to them in their native language when working with a client who is illiterate in their native language,	3.42	0.919
uses adult family members of refugee clients for translation purposes.	2	1.011
uses friends of refugee clients for translation purposes.	1.91	0.905
uses the children of refugee clients for translation purposes.	1.71	0.922
offers multiple refugee language options on our website.	1.68	1.105
provides a multilingual library for families who are in shelter.	1.8	1.036
uses paid staff for translation purposes when working with refugee clients.	3.04	1.103
uses regular volunteers for translation purposes when working with refugee clients.	2	1.043

Notes: Respondents rated each item on a scale from 1 = never to 4 = often.

3.4. Data Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the data analysis presented here is limited to descriptive and bivariate analyses. Frequency distributions and descriptive statistics are reported visually and descriptively below. In addition, correlation analyses that examined the relationship between agency characteristics and the aforementioned six domains of cultural responsiveness are reported.

4. Results

4.1. Agency Familiarity with Refugee Communities

As noted above, the median number of refugees served annually among responding agencies was 20. A full 44.2% of respondents reported serving 10 or less refugees per year. It is important to note again that the sampling frame for agencies was 212 resettlement cities across the U.S., where refugee communities comprise a nontrivial proportion of the wider population, sometimes upwards of 50,000. Agency directors were asked to identify the top three refugee groups (country of origin) in their city from an exhaustive dropdown list. Respondent choices were then compared to the Refugee Processing Center data for their state's resettlement cities over the past 5 years.[1] Just over half of respondents (53%) did not correctly identify the country of origin of any of the top three groups in their area, and the remaining identified one (38%) and two (9%) groups correctly. No respondents correctly identified the top three groups according to the Refugee Processing Center data.

4.2. Culturally Responsive Organizational Practices

A series of Likert scale questions asked survey respondents to rate the frequency with which various practices existed within their agency. Each item ranged on a scale from 1 = never to 4 = often, with higher mean scores indicating higher frequency for which the practices occur. When asked about agency values and practices, respondents indicated that their agency's staff were frequently knowledgeable about the cultural practices, values, and norms of refugee communities, but the practice of actively developing domestic violence leaders and advocates from within refugee communities was less common. Concerning agency staffing and programmatic practices, agencies most frequently responded that they promoted, mentored, and recruited bicultural and bilingual staff. Less often, however, did agencies report that they held multicultural events to promote cultural immersion or hire staff specifically from the refugee community to help with engagement and outreach. In fact, 2 out of 3 respondents (67%) reported they seldom or never hired from the refugee community to help with engagement and outreach. In terms of interagency collaboration, agencies reported that they more frequently worked to build relationships with other domestic violence service providers, as well as with refugee services offices, but they less often partnered with medical providers and faith leaders from refugee communities.

When asked about agency systems and processes for assessment, agencies reported more frequently assessing cultural competence practices, but less frequently reported that they use culturally relevant screening and assessment tools. When it came to accommodations and adaptations they make in their programs and shelter, the most frequent agency practice was establishing partnerships with legal service providers who have experience in working with the refugee community. In terms of addressing language concerns associated with working with the refugee community, agencies most often took measures to verbally convey necessary content to clients in their native language. Utilizing paid staff for translation purposes as well as providing translated hardcopy materials in accessible languages were other frequent practices among agencies. Agencies were less likely to provide multilingual libraries for clients in shelter or offer multiple refugee language options on agency websites.

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[1]   http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals.

Among all six domains of cultural responsiveness, agencies reported most frequently enacting culturally responsive agency staffing and programmatic practices. Conversely, agencies less often reported enacting program and shelter accommodations and adaptations. All individual items within each of the six domains can be seen in Table 2.

4.3. Language Concerns

In addition, the respondents were asked to report whether or not their agency uses telephone translation services, and the overwhelming majority of agencies do (83.7%). However, only 47% of respondents could name the translation service their organization uses, and only 37% indicated that their agency dedicated a portion of their annual operating budget toward translation services.

4.4. Bivariate Results

Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which agency characteristics were associated with various domains of agency cultural responsiveness. As described in the instrumentation section and presented above in Table 2, domains of cultural responsiveness were calculated as composite scores and thus, reflect all items within each category. A number of agency characteristics were associated with one or more of the six domains of agency cultural responsiveness. The number of years the agency has been operating was negatively correlated to agency approaches to language concerns and agency systems/processes for assessment. In other words, the longer an agency had been in operation, the less often they reported implementing culturally responsive practices in language and assessment. The number of paid staff and number of clients served annually at an agency were not associated with any of the six domains of cultural responsiveness, but the number of volunteers was associated positively with program/shelter accommodations and adaptations. The annual budget was positively associated with agency values and practices, but the annual translation budget was not associated with any of the six domains of cultural responsiveness. One agency characteristic emerged as a key characteristic associated with multiple domains of cultural responsiveness: the percentage of total clients who are refugees within an annual period was positively associated with agency values and practices, agency staffing and programmatic practices, and interagency collaboration and outreach. However, the strength of these correlations only ranges from 0.296 to 0.347. Nearly every cultural competence domain was highly correlated with each other. Please see Table 3 for additional details.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations among Agency Characteristics and Domains of Agency Cultural Responsiveness.

Domains of Agency Cultural Responsiveness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Years Agency Operating	-												
2 Number of Paid Staff	0.298 *	-											
3 Number of Volunteers	0.417 **	0.291 *	-										
4 Number of Clients Served Annually	0.175	0.748 **	0.173	-									
5 Annual Budget	0.357 *	0.962 **	0.557 **	0.414 **	-								
6 Annual Translation Budget	0.255	0.874 **	0.099	0.787 **	0.583 **	-							
7 Percentage of Total Clients Who Are Refugees	-0.208	-0.117	-0.097	-0.088	-0.042	-0.137	-						
8 Agency Values and Practices	-0.17	-0.142	-0.278	0.054	-0.317 *	0.069	0.316 *	-					
9 Agency Staffing and Programmatic Practices	-0.195	-0.052	-0.229	0.117	-0.226	0.124	0.347 *	0.841 **	-				
10 Interagency Collaboration and Outreach	-0.134	-0.066	-0.125	0.07	-0.194	0.015	0.296 *	0.844 **	0.698 **	-			
11 Agency Systems and Processes for Assessment	-0.297 *	0.027	-0.24	0.216	-0.12	0.269	0.275	0.762 **	0.820 **	0.671 **	-		
12 Program and Shelter Accommodations and Adaptations	-0.026	0.004	0.321 *	-0.096	0.237	-0.196	-0.177	-0.406 **	-0.304 *	-0.323 *	-0.338 *	-	
13 Agency Approaches to Language Concerns	-0.332 *	-0.1	-0.26	-0.013	-0.206	0.1	0.244	0.653 **	0.747 **	0.632 **	0.736 **	-0.268	-

Note: * indicates statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level; ** indicates statistical significance at the $p < 0.01$ level.

5. Discussion

The study results indicate there is a gap between domestic violence agencies and refugee communities in terms of familiarity. The results showed that by and large, executive directors were not able to name the most predominant refugee groups in their city. This is meaningful because the DV agencies surveyed were located in refugee resettlement cities, where refugee populations comprise a nontrivial portion of the wider population. When agencies lack even the basic knowledge of what refugee communities are most predominant in their city, they most likely lack more specific knowledge regarding cultural values and considerations within these communities that would improve their ability to effectively meet the needs of refugee DV survivors. For example, if an organization knew that one of the predominant refugee communities in their city was Somali, they might develop a basic understanding of Sunni Islamic traditions which could guide organizational outreach efforts. This finding connects to the number of refugee clients served per year—where nearly half of reporting agencies indicated serving 10 or fewer refugees annually. Without enough exposure, agencies may not experience a sense of urgency to adapt their services to better serve refugee communities. However, it should be reiterated that the responding agencies were located in resettlement cities where overall refugee populations comprise a meaningful proportion of the wider population. Lack of agency exposure to refugee communities should not be equated with a lack of need within refugee communities

In line with a general lack of familiarity with the refugee communities in their city, executive directors generally reported lower frequencies of agency outreach efforts to more informal refugee community contacts like faith leaders. The results suggested that, in general, DV agencies could improve interagency collaboration with refugee service providers as well as meaningful engagement with local refugee community leaders. In their 2009 report for the Family Violence Prevention Fund, Runner, Yoshihama, and Novick discuss how some DV organizations report little success in engaging existing community leaders in refugee and immigrant communities in the fight against domestic violence. Some of this may be due to a lack of organizational resources, and our results suggest this may be due to a lack of organizational prioritization.

Although DV agencies reported less frequently hiring from refugee communities, they reported more frequently hiring bilingual staff and encouraging cultural competence training. Agencies generally reported frequently engaging in organizational practices that promote dialogue and critical introspection among their staff, but less frequently reported efforts that promoted bidirectional exchanges with refugee communities. There seemed to be an inherent disconnect between how often agencies reported that they implement culturally responsive language practices for refugee communities and their agency budget for translation. While more than 8 out of 10 agencies reported that they use a translation service, almost 2 out of 3 agencies reported that they did not have an annual budget to support translation services. Agencies reported that they more often use formal translation services for help with refugee clients, as opposed to friends, family, and children; however, it is unclear how these services are being supported in agency budgets.

It is important to note that almost half (44%) of the agencies reported that 5% or more of their annual client population were from refugee communities in their city. When more than 5% of an agency's client base share an important identifying characteristic such as refugee status, it is critical that the agency develop and implement multi-level organizational approaches that support cultural responsiveness. Although among some of the weaker correlations, analyses showed that the percentage of clients served in the previous year who were refugees was positively associated with three of the six domains of cultural responsiveness, indicating that ongoing contact and cultural exchange can catapult organizations toward a deeper practice of cultural responsiveness.

Counterintuitively, the resources agencies allocate for translation services (one of the most critical supports according to the literature) was not associated with any of the domains of cultural responsiveness. Further, the length of time the agency had operated was inversely correlated with systems and processes for assessment and approaches to language concerns. This could reflect an entrenchment in prior ways of operating among older organizations. Older DV organizations are often

better resourced financially and stand to make the biggest impact in their cities. However, if these same organizations are not incorporating culturally responsive organizational practices, refugee survivors will continue to pay the price. No other organizational structure variables were correlated with agency cultural responsiveness domains.

The associations between cultural responsiveness domains were very strong and predominantly positive (with the exception of program/shelter accommodations/adaptations). From agency values/practices to agency approaches to language concerns, the correlations among these domains ranged from 0.63 to 84. Specifically, the correlations between language concerns and other domains of cultural responsiveness were high. When agencies are actively taking steps to translate materials, provide translation services, and generally communicate with clients in respectful ways that prioritize their lived experience, it is not surprising that agency values and other domains of cultural responsiveness would be thriving. These findings may point to the idea that when agencies enact culturally responsive practices in one domain, they are more likely to enact them in another. These practices can build on each other and lead to further improvements. For example, when an agency commits to hiring bilingual and bicultural staff, the agency perspective will broaden and new areas for improvement will be identified and rectified. These practices can domino into a more culturally responsive system on the whole as each incremental improvement spurs the agency to take action in the next. Findings from the bivariate analyses underscore a resounding theme in the literature: that agencies must take *active* steps to build a more culturally responsive organization.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations associated with this study. The first and foremost is the likelihood that agencies overestimated their cultural responsiveness due to social desirability and thus, the results may not accurately reflect the extent to which cultural competence and responsiveness permeates their agency. Secondly, the response rate of the survey (28%) likely points to selection bias and could further skew the results to overrepresenting the levels of cultural competence and responsiveness among domestic violence organizations. It is possible that organizations already invested in this work self-selected into the survey. Organizations that were more uncertain about their ability to serve refugee populations are more likely to have opted out of the survey, as Daniels and Belton (2015) found. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all DV agencies in U.S. resettlement cities. Finally, due to the study's descriptive and exploratory nature, the results do not link culturally responsive strategies to specific outcomes for victims of domestic violence. The results give us a starting point for understanding the extent of cultural competence and responsiveness among domestic violence organizations; however, they do not offer clear guidance for how to prioritize organizational change to effect positive outcomes for refugee clients. This then, is a natural next for future research. Evaluating the efficacy of specific culturally competent practices and organizational policies is critical in order to inform evidence-based practice with refugee domestic violence survivors.

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