Fragmented Solidarities: on Female Survivors of Domestic Violence with a Migration Background in the Netherlands

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Life is better with others

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Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Domestic Violence Against Women: Outlining the Context

1.2. Situating Domestic Violence

1.3. Gendered Cultural Expectations and Domestic Violence

1.4. The Intersection of Solidarities

1.5. Research Design and Methods

1.6. Thesis Outline

Chapter 2

The Role of Dutch Policies in Women with Migration Backgrounds' Decisions to Leave a Violent Relationship

2.1. Introduction

2.2. State of the Art

2.3. Methodology

2.4. Results

2.5. Discussion

Chapter 3

Survivors' Experiences on the Dynamics of Family Solidarity following Domestic Violence

3.1. Introduction

3.2. State of the Art

3.3. Methodology

3.4. Results

3.5. Discussion

3.6. Limitations and Further Research

3.7. Practical Recommendations

3.8. Conclusion

Chapter 4

Navigating Gender and Cultural Backgrounds in Domestic Violence Social Workers' Assistance

4.1. Introduction

4.2. State of the Art

4.3. Methodology

4.4. Results

4.5. Discussion and Conclusion

4.6. Limitations and Further Research

Chapter 5

Tensions between Autonomy and Safety in Social Workers' Interventions in Dutch Shelters for Female Survivors of Domestic Violence

5.1. Introduction

5.2. State of the Art

5.3. Methodology

5.4. Results

5.5. Discussion

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

6.2. Discussion and Conclusion

6.3. Limitations

6.4. Practical Recommendations

6.5. Future Research

References

Samenvatting

Curriculum Vitae

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Domestic Violence Against Women: Outlining the Context

"*You can be a strong woman who stands up for herself, but when it comes to love, shame, and culture, suddenly a strong woman can become very small. And that's also what happened to me. On top of that, I have divorced parents. I just never wanted that for my children."* – Yasmina, survivor

I met Yasmina in a women's shelter in the Dutch province of South Holland, where I spent approximately one and a half years researching the intersection of domestic violence against women and social work. The shelter can accommodate twenty women with or without children, who have fled violence in their homes and lack safe alternatives. Consequently, in the Netherlands, they can generally stay in the shelter for six to nine months to stabilize their situation (Bargellini, 2021). I have had the opportunity to talk and interview both female survivors in heterosexual relationships and social workers. This allowed me to gain insights into the range of factors that affect the decision-making of women who have experienced domestic violence, most notably their decisions to leave or stay with a partner, and in the longer term, the decisions of some to eventually return to their partner. This research highlights that, despite a desire to end the violence, for many of these women the decision to leave is often delayed or followed by a return to their abusive partner, driven by a confluence of factors (Burman & Chantler, 2005; Stulz et al., 2024; Mabunda et al., 2025).

Prior research has examined factors impacting women's decision-making process to remain in or leave abusive relationships (Herbert et al., 1991; McKinley & Liddell, 2022; Heron et al., 2022). For example, past research has highlighted love (Heron et al., 2022), children (Sani & Pereira, 2020), the belief that violence is normal (Clark, 2016), and the unfamiliarity and distrust in support systems (Erez, 2002; Burman & Chantler, 2005) as important factors. Various researchers also highlighted the role of gendered cultural expectations in survivors' decision-making processes (Morse et al., 2012; Ahmad et al., 2017; Gennari et al., 2017; Bhandari & Sabri, 2020; Khan et al., 2022). This shows that the intersectionality of gender and cultural expectations and background cannot be ignored in researching women's decision-making processes. This aligns with Yasmina's story, as well as that of other women I interviewed. Yasmina attributes part of her hesitation to leave her partner to cultural expectations, specifically her Surinamese-Hindu upbringing, which emphasizes a gendered power imbalance, the stigma of divorce, and the cultural importance placed on staying together as a family. The women's stories illustrate how gendered cultural expectations can influence women's perceptions of separation, even when those expectations may conflict with their immediate safety or well-being. These cultural expectations may influence other factors as well, such as family support (Sabri et al., 2018), institutional barriers (Erez et al., 2009), or the social professionals' assistance (Wachter et al., 2022; Childress et al., 2023; Green et al., 2024). Consequently, these expectations and their influence on solidarity from families, institutions, and social workers are a common thread in this study. Section 1.3. will elaborate on the role of cultural expectations in domestic violence situations.

Still, there is a lack of detailed, in-depth research on the intersection of factors related to gender and cultural background, including migration history, particularly within the field of Dutch social work. Moreover, social work literature identifies gender, cultural, and migration background as identity traits vital in understanding risk dynamics, professional engagement, and the design of tailored interventions (Mshweshwe, 2020; Wachter et al., 2022; Green et al., 2024). In the Dutch context, this intersection is particularly significant for women who arrive as first-generation migrants, who also occupy an additional vulnerable position due to their residence status (de Hart et al., 2022). Migration-related factors—such as insecure residency status, language barriers, dependency on a spouse for legal and

economic stability, and limited social networks—can exacerbate vulnerability and create obstacles to seeking help in cases of domestic violence (Alsinai et al., 2023; Innes et al., 2024). Research on this target group is increasingly relevant given the growing diversity of people with a (first-generation) migration background in the Netherlands (CBS, 2025). Therefore, by including this target group, this study highlights a group whose experiences are shaped not only by domestic violence dynamics but also by broader social and structural factors.

This research explores how gendered cultural expectations influence institutional, family, and social workers' solidarity towards women of migration backgrounds in their decision-making in staying with, leaving, or returning to an abusive relationship. Included in social workers' solidarity is the exploration of how their actions, identity, and cultural competence can directly impact women's trust in services, their willingness to seek help, and the outcomes of intervention efforts. By providing nuanced, context-specific evidence, the research advances the academic understanding of domestic violence, intersectionality, and migration. Without targeted, culturally informed research into these dynamics, interventions risk remaining inaccessible or ineffective for some of the women most in need of protection. Therefore, this research offers practical guidance for developing culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices. From a policy perspective, the results may therefore be of value in helping to create culturally accessible resources, enhance legal protections for women with dependent residency status, and support coordinated interventions that connect informal and formal support systems. More than just academic work, this study fulfils an ethical duty to amplify underrepresented voices, tackle systemic barriers, and empower professionals with the knowledge needed to better protect the rights and well-being of women in vulnerable positions in the Netherlands. Practical recommendations will be elaborated in Chapter Six.

All the women escaped from their partners, but some of them additionally experienced violence from their family-in-law, which also affected their decision-making. Accordingly, I use the term domestic violence or abuse against women (from now onwards domestic violence or abuse) rather than intimate partner violence, to capture better the broader constellation of abuse, which can extend beyond the partner relationship. Moreover, whilst not the focus of the research primarily, the role of children and the influence they may have over the women's decision-making is also critically considered. Furthermore, throughout the thesis, I consistently use the word 'survivors' instead of 'victims'. The term "victim" has connotations of passivity and disempowerment, which can obscure the agency that women demonstrate even in situations of constraint. Survivor, by contrast, counteracts this stigma and acknowledges their agency in making decisions (see Best, 1997; Dunn, 2005; Leburu, 2023). This also describes the women I met in the shelter, who constantly reflected on options and made choices within their relationships, but also in their future lives.

Starting with an analysis of gendered and culturally embedded expectations shaped by women's socio-cultural backgrounds, this article-based thesis aims to examine how these factors influence additional determinants, including the role of family members' reactions, the interpretive and responsive practices of social workers, and broader Dutch policies and their implementation. Consequently, the main question driving this research is as follows: **"How do gendered cultural expectations influence institutional, family, and social workers' solidarity towards women of migration backgrounds who experienced domestic violence?".** The concept of solidarity is applied as a fundamental paradigm, which is further subdivided into institutional [Chapter Two], family [Chapter Three], and social workers'

[Chapters Four and Five] solidarity. The specific sub-questions that address each of these areas are elaborated further in Section 1.6.

1.2. Situating Domestic Violence

According to Dutch Statline (CBS, 2024), in 2024, 9% of the population aged 16 or older—nearly 1.3 million people—reported having experienced one or more forms of domestic violence in the past year. Of these, 7% were reported as structural, meaning they faced at least one form of domestic violence (almost) daily, weekly, or monthly during that period. The most common form was psychological violence, followed by physical violence and being stalked by an ex-partner. These numbers reflect only those who have reported the violence and do not include individuals who have remained silent or hidden. Research by FRA, EIGE, and Eurostat (2024) indicated that 33.4% of adult women in the Netherlands have been in relationships involving intimate partner violence, which encompasses physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. This data specifically focuses on women, without specifying the gender of the partner involved. Overall, these statistics highlight that women are particularly vulnerable to violence within intimate relationships.

The definition of domestic violence between partners, also called intimate partner violence, in the mentioned research includes physical, psychological, and sexual violence. When looking more closely at the Dutch definition, violence is categorized as "*Physical, mental or sexual abuse or threat thereof by someone from the domestic circle (definition article 1 Wmo 2015)".* A domestic circle includes current and former partners, relatives, housemates, informal caregivers, and household friends. The definition lies in its focus on the relationship between the perpetrator and survivor, and could manifest in (ex-)partner violence, child and elder abuse or neglect, or violence against parents (CBS, 2025). Notably, definitions of domestic violence by FRA, EIGE, and Eurostat (2024), and the Dutch state (CBS, 2025) are similar. However, I consciously choose not to fully endorse these definitions, as they exclude economic violence, such as limiting a partner's right to work or restricting access to finances, and coercion (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). In my research, I observed that women often face this form of coercive and financial violence, frequently alongside other types. Hence, I follow the definition that is stated by the United Nations (UNESCWA, n.d.), defining domestic violence as:

"*as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone*".

1.3. Gendered Cultural Expectations and Domestic Violence

"*Yeah, for my daughters too, I believe my culture is not feminist. My mother, but also others, don't believe in feminism. But I stayed quiet when they told me about things. Why should I tell them [daughters] how to live in the future? But I will tell them the good things and bad things [about my culture].*" – Mary, survivor

In this quote, Mary, a survivor of domestic violence from a Pakistani background and nationality, shares how she grew up with cultural and social expectations for women. These expectations are one reason Mary, like Yasmina and other women I interviewed, remained with her partner initially, despite being subject to both physical and emotional violence in the relationship.

The issue of cultural expectations and domestic violence has been discussed extensively in academic and political debates. It is a controversial topic that can lead to stereotyping, stigma, and racism (Burman & Chantler, 2005), often as a result of the culturalization of violence (Römkens, 2017; Mellaard & van Meijl, 2021; Mattoo & Merrigan, 2021). In academic debates, Susan M. Okin (1998; Okin et al., 1999) has been one of the prominent philosophers arguing that accepting certain cultural norms from migrant groups in Western societies, such as the United States, legitimizes sexism against women. She provides examples involving various nationalities, such as Iraq and Togo, and religions like Islam and Hinduism. For example, she states: "*The more general pattern in many cultures that lies behind such examples is one of unequal treatment and control of young women that can have lifelong repercussions and that originates in and is largely carried out in the domestic sphere*" (1998, p. 681).

In the Netherlands, scholars have observed that political parties similarly tend to frame violence through a cultural lens in discourses, policy proposals, and government initiatives (see Ghorashi, 2010; Roggeband, 2012; Römkens, 2017; Mellaard & van Meijl, 2021). For example, Roggeband (2012, p. 797) noted that in 2004, the Dutch government "*presented a policy plan that linked migrants' culture with unequal gender relations; violence was seen as a way to reinforce this inequality, and many forms of violence against women were labelled as 'culturally legitimated*." These perspectives suggest a broader trend of essentializing non-Western migrant communities, portraying them as culturally more violent and therefore distinct from Dutch culture (Mellaard & van Meijl, 2021). A negative consequence of this culturalization (Duyvendak et al., 2016) is that it can discourage survivors of non-Western cultural backgrounds from sharing their experiences with professionals out of fear of stigma and participating in a xenophobic discourse, which can hinder leaving abusive relationships (Burman & Chantler, 2005; Simon-Kumar et al., 2017; Walker, 2020).

While I don't want to contribute to this culturalization of violence, it remains important to recognize that gendered cultural expectations do play a role in affecting women's decisions about staying with or returning to partners. "Gendered cultural expectations" or simply "cultural expectations" represent the gendered standards individuals are expected to meet to be accepted or considered appropriate within their cultural group (Wienclaw, 2011; Zahrai, 2014). Different cultures have varying expectations, but some, especially concerning gender roles, separation, and domestic violence, tend to be more rigid. This has consequences for how women think about separation, even in cases of violence. For example, Tabassum (2016) indicated in her research that there are still expectations that women in Pakistan are raised and educated to be obedient to their partners. While a generalized perspective of cultural expectations exists, culture is dynamic and context-dependent, and people with the same cultural background can differ in terms of gender, class, religion, personality, city of origin, and other factors (Kleinman & Benson, 2016). Hence, the way in which women and their families relate to cultural expectations can vary from person to person and from family to family. Families may either act in solidarity with a woman experiencing abuse or allow the cultural expectations that women should not leave their partner to prevail. This will be further discussed in Section 1.4. and will be empirically explored in Chapter Three.

While these expectations play a role in women's decision-making, I will also explore how cultural expectations influence other factors, such as family support, policies and their implementation, and the identity and actions of social workers in their client assistance. I thus research how these expectations influence the solidarity shown towards survivors by families, policies, and social workers.

1.4. The Intersection of Solidarities

Within social sciences, since Durkheim's first theorization ([1893] 1969), solidarity has become a widely discussed concept (Schmitt, 2022; Rawłuszko, 2022). The term solidarity refers to providing support to others. Unlike passive or symbolic support, solidarity involves taking risks—emotional, social, or material—on behalf of others (Bayertz, 1999; Hopman & Knijn, 2022). Bayertz (1999) identifies four types, including Human Solidarity, which involves bonds between humans, such as family ties and blood relations. A second type is Social Solidarity, based on shared history or culture. A third type is Political Solidarity, which entails active support from individuals for common interests. Finally, Bayertz discusses Civic Solidarity, which involves state-led measures for wealth redistribution and support within the state, often formalized through legislation and welfare systems. The solidarities described in each section of this thesis are embedded in Bayertz's (1999) perspective on solidarity. Understanding these types of solidarity is essential because they offer a framework for analysing how support is given, withheld, or conditioned within cultural contexts. At the same time, solidarity never operates alone. It is closely linked with other structures of power and inequality. This is where an intersectional perspective becomes essential.

Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to challenge the then-dominant single-axis model of discrimination against black women in the United States. Crenshaw advocated for an intersectional approach to social and legal issues, recognizing how multiple identities interact to shape experiences of oppression and discrimination, especially for groups perceived as marginalized. Intersectionality is not just about summing identities but understanding how systems like racism, sexism, and classism intersect to create specific outcomes. It is about how power structures influence experience, opportunities, and the production of knowledge (Collins, 2000). I employ intersectionality as a research perspective, aiming to underscore the interconnectedness of social structures. Individuals experience the world through overlapping social positions that are embedded in broader systems of power, oppression, and privilege. These systems work collectively, not separately, to shape lived experiences. This perspective helps to reveal inequalities that single-category analyses often obscure, ensuring that the experiences of groups perceived as marginalized are not overlooked (Davis, 2008).

In this thesis, intersectionality is applied throughout several chapters to illuminate the complexity of lived experiences. Chapters Two and Three employ an intersectional framework to examine how different aspects of female survivors' identities intersect to shape their experiences of both privilege and oppression, with particular attention to how these intersections reinforce social inequality. Chapter Four applies intersectionality to explore how different aspects of social workers' social identities influence their assistance with clients. Finally, in Chapter Five, social workers consider the intersection of gendered and cultural expectations with survivors' migration status, again focusing on broader systems of power.

The subsequent sections will examine how different forms of solidarity—namely, institutional, familial, and the role of social workers—are employed as analytical frameworks within this study. Before this examination, however, it is essential to delineate the specific contextual conditions in which these frameworks are situated, to clarify the grounds upon which the analysis proceeds.

1.4.1. The Dutch Policy on Domestic Violence

"*The women's shelters in particular have a feminist history, which has more or less somewhat disappeared, never completely gone away, but diminished, and it is now getting attention again.*" – Yolanda, managing social worker

In this quote, Yolanda highlights that women's shelters in the Netherlands were historically rooted in feminist activism. Feminist advocacy, in cooperation with the state, contributed to the implementation of one of the first formal protections for female survivors of domestic violence in the Netherlands in 1984 (Roggeband, 2012). The general aim of the policy was to combat sexual violence against women and girls. The fight against domestic violence was included in this policy (ten Boom et al., 2019). Additionally, this policy resulted in increased state funding for women's shelters, which had previously relied on a governmental grant. The goal was to reduce domestic violence and address violence against women in general (Mellaard & van Meijl, 2021). Other measures were also implemented to reduce this issue, such as the criminalization of marital rape in 1991 (ten Boom et al., 2019).

Since 1984, Dutch policy has undergone substantial changes, adopting a gender-neutral perspective and wording in 2002 (Althoff et al., 2021). This policy plan addresses both perpetrators and survivors in gender-neutral terms, rather than focusing on the result of asymmetric gendered power relations (Roggeband, 2012; Estrada Londoño, 2022). The change in gendered perspective has not been excluded from criticism (Roggeband, 2012; Mellaard & van Meijl, 2021). For instance, GREVIO, an organ of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, GREVIO, 2020), has suggested that the Netherlands should highlight gender when looking at domestic violence, as proposed at the Convention of Istanbul. Mellaard & van Meijl (2021) also argued that the actual perspective on domestic violence overlooks the structural and gendered nature of partner violence. Notwithstanding that, in the policy, other intersectional categories, such as migration history, socio-economic status, or sexuality, are overlooked (Römkens, 2017; Estrada Londoño, 2022). For instance, the policy on domestic violence often intersects with the policy on migration (de Hart et al., 2022), which will be elaborated in Chapter Two of this thesis, following the case of marriage migration.

Next to this, an important addition to the policy is how domestic violence should be addressed in practice. The policy clarifies the responsibilities of professionals aware of such situations. Professionals are not mandated to report incidents of domestic violence revealed by clients or patients. Nonetheless, the Compulsory Reporting Code for Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Act has been effective since 2013. This protocol requires professionals working with both children and adults to follow five steps for reporting in cases of suspected domestic violence or child abuse (Rijksoverheid, n.d.), emphasizing the professionals' professional autonomy as well. The role of front-line professionals will be elaborated in Chapter Two.

The way in which policies are created and enacted by state-funded professionals can lead to specific outcomes for women experiencing domestic violence. Consequently, institutional solidarity is the analytical perspective I use to determine whether this policy leads to supportive results or not. The concept aligns with Bayertz's (1999) notion of Civic Solidarity, which underscores the routine and institutionalized provision of support. However, for clarity, I adopt a more specific definition from Arts and Gelissen (2001), who describe institutional solidarity as support provided to citizens in need through formal mechanisms, such as laws and policies, and by professionals facilitating their implementation. This definition is foregrounded in Chapter Two, as it highlights not only the structural

dimension of solidarity embodied in institutional arrangements but also the role of professionals translating policy into concrete practices of support.

1.4.2. Family Support and Domestic Violence

"My mother said: "You left [him], so you are wrong", even if I told her that I couldn't handle it anymore. Unlike my father, he said I made the right choice." – Sija, survivor

Escaping a violent relationship is rarely a straightforward decision, and, as illustrated by Sija's account, people's reactions to such situations can vary significantly. This also includes those of family members (Latta & Goodman, 2011). The attitudes of family members toward separation can strongly shape whether they provide support when a survivor seeks help (Latta & Goodman, 2011; Sabri et al., 2018; Hulley et al., 2023). These attitudes may be connected to cultural expectations, as indicated in Sabri et al.'s (2018) study, which examined the risks and protective factors influencing South Asian migrant women (from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan) living in the United States and their decisions to remain in or leave abusive relationships. Their study shared that one-third of the participants reported that their families were more concerned about the stigma associated with separation than about the violence itself. As a result, women were pressured by their families to return to abusive partners.

Next to cultural expectations, family members may withhold support for other reasons. They might, for example, doubt the survivor's account of abuse (Lempert, 1997). Latta & Goodman (2011) also observed that family members may feel unsure about how to provide effective support, or sometimes fear aggression from the abuser, worrying that offering support could put them in danger. Additionally, relatives may become discouraged if the survivor returns to the abusive partner, leading to a gradual decline in their willingness to help (Latta & Goodman, 2011; Bellotti et al., 2021). Conversely, studies show that family members can also provide immediate support for a woman's decision and even encourage her to leave (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Bellotti et al., 2021). An example from Bellotti et al.'s (2021) research includes family members referring the survivor to formal support or helping them find a safe place to stay. Chapter Three builds on these insights by examining not only how family members initially reacted upon learning about the abuse, but also how they navigated their decision-making processes regarding support over time, especially when cultural expectations influenced their responses. This chapter explores how survivors experienced these changing family reactions through the lens of family solidarity. The definition employed here can be incorporated into Bayertz's broader account of human solidarity (1999). More specifically, family solidarity has been defined as families' "shared practices reflecting a collective commitment to carry 'costs' (financial, social, emotional, or other) to assist others" (Prainsack & Buyx, 2011, p. xiv), thereby grounding the notion of solidarity in the concrete practices of kinship, care, and mutual support.

1.4.3. Social Workers and Domestic Violence

"*My social worker said: "Saawi, I fear you won't be alive anymore. Or I think you will return to the shelter". And she was right, because I am back in the shelter*." – Saawi, survivor

As Saawi mentions in the quote above, when I interviewed her, it was not her first time in the shelter. The previous time, her social worker expressed concerns about her considering returning to her partner, which is what Saawi eventually did. When women arrive at shelters or seek assistance following experiences of domestic violence, they often come into close contact with social workers. These professionals have various roles, providing not only practical support but also emotional and

relational assistance (Sullivan, 2018; Ulmestig, 2020). These encounters are not merely technical interventions, but are also influenced by the social workers' identities and actions. Under the umbrella of 'social workers' solidarity', I examine how the decisions, interventions, and identities of social workers can influence women's outlooks on their futures.

Chapter Four focuses on how social workers' social identities — particularly their gender and cultural background — can influence the support they provide and how this affects women's experiences during their stay in shelters. The analysis draws on the framework of social identity. Social identity refers to an individual's awareness of belonging to a particular social group, such as a particular gender, religion, cultural background, or socio-economic class (Stets & Burke, 2000). The way in which social workers employ their gender and cultural background can be seen as aligned with Bayertz's (1999) concept of Social Solidarity, based on a shared culture and history. However, cultural or other identity differences that can lead to positive social worker–client relationships are also discussed.

Returning to Saawi's quote, it is visible that social workers do not always agree with the choices of the women they work with. Yet, they cannot force women to follow their advice. This highlights a tension within social work practice, elaborated in Chapter Five. One of the profession's core principles is client autonomy, which holds that adult clients generally have the right to make their own decisions (BPSW, 2021). The question of autonomy becomes particularly salient when survivors consider returning to a violent relationship. While social workers may strongly disagree with such choices due to concerns for the client's safety, they remain bound by the ethical obligation to respect autonomy. This creates a central dilemma: how can practitioners reconcile their duty to uphold client autonomy with their professional responsibility to protect clients from harm? This tension between respecting survivors' self-determination and safeguarding their well-being constitutes a profound ethical challenge in practice. It reflects the difficult balance between non-intervention and proactive protection and solidarity. This tension reflects both institutional constraints and the expression of social workers' solidarity, with the two deeply intertwined. In discussing this topic, I critically apply Nussbaum's (2000) capability approach to autonomy as an analytical framework.

1.4.4. Connections

The concept of intersectionality refers in this thesis to how institutional, family, and social workers' solidarity is deeply intertwined in shaping both survivors' decision-making and social workers' interventions, while not excluding the role of cultural expectations. For survivors of violence, these factors influence the complex choices of whether to stay, leave, or return to a partner. Institutional and family solidarity can either support or hinder a woman's decision to leave a violent relationship. Likewise, the way in which social workers draw on their social identity in their interactions with clients can influence the latter's decision-making. Lastly, how social workers can intervene when they believe that it would be safer for a woman not to return to her partner, while she still considers it, cannot be ignored in the influence on women's decisions.

1.5. Research Design and Methods

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the experiences of both female survivors and social workers, and draws on a narrative research framework. Hence, the research aims to offer an in-depth analysis of how stories are interconnected, as well as how they are socially produced and contextualised (Creswell et al., 2007). In total, 47 participants were interviewed: 10 survivors and 37 social workers, including 3 in managerial positions. The reason for exploring the perspectives of both

survivors and social workers was to offer a holistic account of experiences of violence and to consider multiple perspectives on how support and solidarity were expressed and experienced in response to violence. Addressing both survivors and social workers also allowed for a fuller consideration of the dynamics between these groups in the shelter and to consider the shifting relationship between the two.

1.5.1. Survivors of Domestic Violence

Data Collection

Data collection from survivors mainly involved conducting narrative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork at a shelter in a Dutch city. Before starting interviews, I was already present in the shelter as an ethnographic researcher. As outlined by Pole & Hillyard (2016), the goal was to understand firsthand the social dynamics of the research environment, crucial for understanding domestic violence and the shelter's organization**.** Therefore, I spent about one and a half years at the shelter. This required careful planning (Pole & Hillyard, 2016); for instance, I had two introductory meetings with the shelter's team leader and social workers to align values and to discuss the research process and my voluntary contributions, such as helping organize activities. Planned activities included game nights and dance parties, which attracted many women. There were also children's activities on Wednesdays, which helped initiate conversations with mothers. When I could not be present for these activities, I attended other evenings with women. Every time I met someone new, I introduced myself, explained my research, and showed an interest in their life. Although few of these informal conversations were part of the formal data collection, they played an important role in guiding my decisions about which women to invite for interviews.

Being present consistently was crucial for trust-building in this sensitive context. I built rapport over time, which later contributed to data depth (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). Some women quickly caught my attention for being talkative. Moreover, when recognizing a language I mastered, conversation was easier. Still, I tried to include quieter people, often during moments alone or with their children**.** Conversations were sometimes less fluent, but I worked to overcome bias. Most women spoke some Dutch, but if they had little or no Dutch proficiency, I used English, French, or basic Spanish. My limited knowledge of Arabic, Turkish, and Polish hindered in-depth conversations, excluding their stories. Moreover, many with little Dutch, French, or English were aged 40–60, leading to further age exclusions. I chose not to use a translator due to the sensitivity of the topic.

After two months, I started asking women to participate in interviews. I explained during a group meeting that I wanted to conduct interviews. I clarified the aim of the interview, anonymity, and their right to stop anytime. This led two women of Surinamese background to participate. Additionally, I asked others personally. Two Moroccan women declined, three hesitated before agreeing, and one Dutch woman left before scheduling. Therefore, sampling was purposive and convenience-based (Gentles et al., 2016). A key requirement was speaking a language I mastered. I paid additional attention to selecting survivors from different cultural backgrounds, often with a first-generation migration history, as this added a layer in their decision-making process in staying with, leaving, or returning to a violent relationship (Voolma, 2018; Maher & Segrave, 2018).

Narrative interviews were selected to let participants share their experiences (Kartch, 2017). This format enables participants to tell their stories in a meaningful way, which is well-suited for recounting personal life experiences and discussing their perspective (Muylaert et al., 2014). Before the first

interview, I tested the questions with my colleague Joelle Badran. The interviews ran from June 2022 to March 2023. During the interviews, none terminated early. Three women participated twice, with the second interviews being shorter and more loosely structured. The first interviews varied in length from 25 to 100 minutes. Although the goal was to conduct narrative interviews, one participant struggled to share her story, resulting in a 25-minute interview. The second interviews had specified questions based on the first interviews and lasted a maximum of thirty minutes.

The last substantive question of the first interviews was a vignette based on a picture by Diego Cervo (2012), described as "Social issues, domestic violence with young husband trying to reconcile with abused wife". I chose a picture of a couple that could represent anyone, allowing identification yet distance. I had invented a story which concerned a woman pressured by her family to return to her partner who had abused her to restore family honour and avoid stigma. Survivors were asked what they would do in her position, giving them an advisory role. This approach, often used for sensitive topics (Jenkins et al., 2010; Benedetti et al., 2018), encouraged discussion of family reactions regarding separation and domestic violence, explored in Chapter Three.



Picture 1 [Diego Cervo, 2012]

The interviews were conducted in three languages: solely Dutch, English, and French and Dutch simultaneously. All the interviews were face-to-face, except for a second interview with one woman who had already left the shelter and was by phone. Next to this, one interview was in the survivors' family house, because she had left the shelter some days before the interview. During five interviews, children under the age of five were present in the room, sleeping or playing, at least three meters from the conversation. There were no other adults present. The interviews were all audio-recorded, and I consciously refrained from taking notes to ensure my full attention was on the participant. At the end of the interview, the women could choose a pseudonym and received a gift as a thank you for their participation, unknown to them in advance of the interview. Their pseudonyms are used in quotes

throughout the chapters. Afterwards, I stayed with the survivor to have an informal conversation about trivia. Once I left, I recorded my thoughts about the interviews, which I kept for myself. I did this to give the sensitive conversation a place and to reflect on my emotions, on what went well, and what could be improved for the next time. As posited by feminist scholars, a reflexive account of a researcher's experienced emotions offers a more profound understanding of the issues being studied (Reger, 2001). Saturation has not been reached, as it was difficult to find other women who were open to being interviewed about their experiences and who could speak a language I am fluent in. I transcribed eight interviews and sent the other two anonymously to a firm. The women had the opportunity to receive their transcriptions; one woman did so, but did not provide feedback.

Characteristics of the Participants

The participants differed in nationality and self-identified cultural background. Four of them were Dutch citizens by birth or acquired Dutch citizenship during childhood. Three were born in the Netherlands, two of whom were second-generation migrants, and the third had a second- and third-generation migration background. Another participant was born in Suriname but moved to the Netherlands and obtained Dutch citizenship during her childhood. The remaining six women migrated to the Netherlands during adulthood, arriving on a marriage migration permit. A marriage migrant is defined as an individual who migrates to the country of their legally recognized partner, also referred to as the referent. This permit is temporary and is recognized as a "dependent residence permit" (de Hart et al., 2022). Detailed information about this status will be elaborated in Chapter Two. One participant had received an independent residence permit and citizenship; the others had not yet. Of the ten women, they self-identified their cultural backgrounds as follows: Moroccan (n = 2), Surinamese (n = 2), Iranian (n = 1), Pakistani (n = 1), Turkish (n = 1), Hindu-Dutch (n = 2), and Dutch with Indonesian and Italian roots (n = 1). Despite the various categorizations of these cultural backgrounds, it was a deliberate decision to maintain these distinctions to respect the women's autonomy in defining their identity according to their terms. Therefore, the cultural backgrounds of the participants are derived from their nationality, as well as their religious affiliation and ethnicity. Regardless of the aforementioned differences, a commonality emerged among the women, namely their shared experience of being raised with the belief that relationship separation or divorce is undesirable.

At the time of the interviews, the participants' ages ranged between 27 and 46 years. All but one had children. However, for two of them, their children were not staying with them in the shelter. Most women had voluntarily chosen their partners, except for one woman, whose marriage was arranged. One woman had been married twice. As a minor, she was in an arranged marriage in Suriname, and later, she entered another marriage voluntarily in the Netherlands. In both marriages, she experienced violence, but I mostly focus on the last marriage, as it happened in the Netherlands. The group of survivors is both representative and non-representative. It is representative as it echoes de Hart et al. (2022) research in that women arriving as marriage migrants asking for protection following domestic violence are mostly Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese, and Iranian. As mentioned, it was non-representative due to language differences.

1.5.2. Social Workers

Data Collection

After conducting narrative interviews, I started semi-structured interviews with the social workers. This method typically consists of a conversation between the researcher and participant, with flexibility in asking questions. While the interview had a specific aim, it was still possible to collect open-ended data

and ask follow-up questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I chose this type of interview with the social workers as they were largely based on the ones with the women. Some themes were derived from already gathered data. Consequently, more specific answers were required.

From December 2022 to mid-May 2023, I conducted 37 interviews with social workers, including team leaders. 16 of them were from the fieldwork shelter, of which 13 were already familiar with my research. Three others associated with the shelter were contacted via email. I identified 18 other social workers online, either via email or by contacting managers on LinkedIn. At the end of each interview, I asked if they knew anyone else interested in participating. As a consequence, four other social workers were found through prior interviews, but one later opted out due to illness. Thus, I used a mix of purposive and snowball sampling (Gentles et al., 2016), concluding recruitment upon reaching saturation. Representation is discussed in the "participants" section.

The interview was divided into three parts. Some of the questions were related to institutional factors, such as the impact of domestic violence and migration policies on women's trajectories. For example, social workers shared the changes they would like to see in the future regarding domestic violence policy and practice in the field. Another part of the interview consisted of the role of social workers' identity (mainly gender and cultural background) in their assistance with their clients. Finally, one part was about the social workers' experiences with women returning to their partners. Therefore, questions were asked about the advice they give when this occurs.

All the interviews were conducted in Dutch and in the shelter where the social workers were affiliated. These shelters were in the provinces of Utrecht, Gelderland, North Brabant, North Holland, Friesland, and other cities in South Holland. The interviews lasted between forty and ninety minutes, and there was no one else present except for the participant and me. There was no pilot for the interviews; however, the first one was with someone from the shelter where I did fieldwork. Afterwards, I asked for feedback on how it could go better. In comparison with the survivors, I did not make fieldnotes before, during, or after the interview. At the end of our conversation, the social workers could choose their pseudonyms, used to quote them in the chapters. Finally, they received a gift as a sign of gratitude.

Afterwards, all interviews, except the first one, were sent to a firm to transcribe them. I had asked the participants not to share their names in the audio, and the most sensitive information was the name of the organisation. In instances where participants had shared their names during the interview, I edited the audio files before sending them for transcription to remove any identifiable details. Social workers received their interview once transcribed and could add, remove, or make changes. Eight of them replied once they received the transcript, of which three provided minor edits.

Characteristics of the Participants

All the social workers were women, which was not the result of a conscious decision. Although I tried to include social workers from different genders working in women's shelters, none of them were interested in participating. Hence, on a gender level, the social workers did not represent a diverse sample. However, regarding their own identified cultural background, there was more representation. Although all were Dutch citizens, they shared a variety of cultural backgrounds, which is elaborated in Chapters Four and Five. All the social workers were at the time of the interviews between 22 and 66 years old, with at least 5 months of working experience.

The roles of these social workers differed according to the organisation, but five types were identified. The first type was residential assistants, whose role was to support women in the shelter by being

present every day, providing activities, and helping with daily life. The second were personal assistants, whose role was to accompany women on legal, social, and psychological bases. Women who arrived at the shelter generally received a residential and personal social worker to discuss their cases and other concerns. A third category comprised ambulatory assistants, whose function is to support women in their homes. Two interviewees were specialist child(ren)-mother social workers, whose practice was focused on a more intimate level with mothers and their children. These social workers had previously worked as personal or residential assistants. Three participants were team managers, of whom two did not work directly with the women, although they were kept informed about the situation of their colleagues working with the women.

1.5.3. Data Analysis

Data has been analysed through the software ATLAS.ti 22, and once anonymized, shared with my supervisors. Additionally, several interviews were also discussed with them to look at patterns. This was the case with all the interviews with the women and two with the social workers. A narrative approach was used. Narrative analysis is a framework in which researchers interpret stories told within the research context or shared in everyday life. This approach includes four typical forms of analysis that can be used in a study: structural, functional, thematic, and dialogic or performance. Structural analysis examines the characteristics of a story, such as its plot elements. Functional looks into the purposes of the story. Thematic analysis regards the content of narratives, focusing on recurring motifs, story types, and genres of the story. Lastly, dialogic or performance looks at the "how, where, and to whom a story is told" (Parcell & Baker, 2017).

Thematic analysis has been used, thus following patterns and recurring themes. Regarding the interviews with the survivors, at the beginning, themes were not yet identified. However, after finding similarities in the first three interviews, specific questions were added. The coding tree was divided into six main codes: (restriction of) autonomy before leaving, (restriction of) autonomy in leaving, and (restriction of) autonomy after leaving. Within these codes, subcodes were divided into the factors and actors that influence the (restriction of) autonomy. The codes for the social workers were divided into identity, institutionally related topics, cultural influence of the women (divided into how they see differences, and how they act on differences), and other smaller topics such as the role of children and empowerment. Both major and minor findings have been shared through context and quotes, translated from French and Dutch to English. The presentation of findings overall was based on major and recurring data from the interviews. While the survivors could, and social workers did, receive their transcription and give feedback, this was not the case for the findings.

1.5.4. Researcher's Reflexivity

While I have enjoyed this PhD trajectory, it was not without challenges and concerns. The main concern was ethical considerations, especially regarding how I would present the research to women who had experienced violence. Notwithstanding that, despite my education, this was my first time doing one-on-one interviews with domestic violence survivors. Even after pilot preparations, I worried they might struggle to share their experiences or that I might ask confrontational questions. During the second interview with two survivors, I noted their discomfort in repeating themselves. They said they did not want to continue talking about the topic, as they wanted to look to the future instead. Looking back, I realize a second interview shouldn't have happened. The first interviews were already challenging for us both; the participant was sharing traumatic experiences, and I was witnessing a woman sharing her pain, tears, and emotions. This did bring up experiences for both of us with negative connotations. In

retrospect, I would adjust several aspects of the process afterwards. Later, I discussed with the shelter's team leader that women should have had time with their social worker to address their feelings and emotions after the interviews.

Another concern throughout this experience was grappling with my positionality to the participants, as a person and as a researcher (Hydén, 2008; Mokgele, 2024). As a person, I remember being particularly anxious about my appearance and how to present myself to others. These concerns quickly disappeared once I arrived at the shelter and was warmly welcomed by the team, offering me beverages and introducing me to everyone. As a researcher in the shelter, I occupied a unique position, one that inherently shaped my role and perspective. I was mindful of my position as a white, French-Belgian researcher working with women in the shelter, many of whom came from non-European backgrounds with cultural experiences different from my own. Although I, too, was a migrant to the Netherlands and (grand)daughter of migrating (grand)parents in Belgium, my path differed from the challenges they faced, such as limited familial support, cultural stigma, racism, and institutional barriers. Rather than viewing these differences as a limitation, I came to see them as an invitation to listen carefully and approach their stories with humility. This awareness helped me to be more attentive and respectful in engaging with their experiences. I also quickly noticed the meaningful commonalities between us, such as the shared experience of navigating life in a new country and the importance of language as a bridge. This shift allowed me to focus on connection and mutual understanding, while valuing the unique insights each woman brought to our interactions. Even when we didn't understand each other enough, I showed interest in learning their language(s) and appreciating how difficult that could be, which is something they had to do with Dutch. Additionally, other common ground was found in the shared struggles we faced. Domestic violence had been close to home for me, which allowed me to better understand the conflicting emotions involved in staying with, leaving, or returning to an abusive situation. In addition, bonds were formed around more universal experiences, such as being a woman, or, for example, I shared with one woman that I, too, had battled depression and could understand how she feels at times. Through these similarities, both vulnerable and empowering, we developed a connection rooted in mutual understanding, trust, and respect.

Regarding the social workers, I encountered fewer challenges in positioning myself as a narrator of their life experiences. My professional background as a social worker facilitated this process, as it provided me with an understanding of the ethical guidelines and tensions inherent in the field. This shared perspective allowed me to more readily recognize and engage with the narratives they shared, while also reinforcing my appreciation for their work. Still, despite being welcomed into their world, I occupied a privileged space—one in which I was compensated for my time at the shelter by a university, and where a clear hierarchy persisted throughout the process (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). In interviews, I was the one who held the role of posing questions rather than receiving them. Moreover, as the researcher, I ended up documenting their experiences in the form of articles and a thesis. I am still the one writing the last word.

1.5.5. Additional Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted following the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the University of Humanistic Studies (04/07/2023) for studies involving humans. In the context of studies involving human participants, in qualitative research, the ethical imperative of care towards the participants is prioritized (Given, 2016). To protect the privacy and fragile safety of the respondents, the data will not be made publicly

available. However, access to non-sensitive materials (e.g., information letters and interview questions) is.

Before the interview, respondents received a consent form and an information letter in Dutch, French, or English, depending on their language preference. I read the documents together with each interviewee to make sure that they understood the research and to emphasize that they may stop whenever they wish during the interview. All participants provided written consent.

1.6. Thesis Outline

Each chapter is based on an academic article that has been published or is still under review. The chapters are explored by means of four different sub-questions:

1. How is institutional solidarity proposed to women, especially with first-generation migration histories, after experiences of domestic violence?
2. How did women experience their relatives' decision-making process when considering leaving a partner, and in what ways did social workers assist in reaching positive relationships between women and their relatives?
3. How do social workers' gender and cultural background influence their practice, and in what ways do they draw on these aspects of their identity in their work with clients?
4. How do social workers navigate autonomy and support when working with women considering returning to an abusive relationship?

The following two chapters concentrate on (the lack of) solidarity experienced by women and the influence of this support on their decision to leave their partner. Chapter Two focuses on the role of Dutch policies and their implementation, examining the policies concerning domestic violence and the intersection with policies on migration. It is demonstrated that these policies frequently discriminate against women, particularly those who have migrated and reside on a dependent residence permit following marriage, due to a lack of support mechanisms such as a free integration trajectory and accepting proof to receive an independent residence status on grounds of violence. The third chapter explores the role of family in decision-making processes to leave a partner, highlighting the significance of dynamic familial support in facilitating escape from abusive environments, despite cultural and other factors that may impede separation. The findings are based primarily on interviews with women, with additional insights from interviews with social workers.

Chapter Four looks into the role of intersecting social identities of social workers in their assistance to clients. The benefits and challenges of social workers' gender and cultural background are highlighted, and how they draw on these social identities and other experiences in their assistance. I argue that social workers should be able to draw on their social identity traits and experiences in their assistance with clients, as it helps build rapport and leads to feelings of solidarity. Chapter Five looks into social workers' interventions when a woman tells them she considers returning to a partner. I posit that social workers should have greater liberty in their interventions in these situations, encouraging women to prioritise ensuring a safer environment. Unlike the first two chapters, the latter chapters are written solely from the social workers' perspectives. Finally, in Chapter Six, a summary of the most significant findings from the preceding chapters is provided, drawing connections between them and clarifying how these insights contribute to a larger argument. I finish with limitations, practical recommendations, and a presentation of avenues for future research.

Chapter 2

The Role of Dutch Policies in Women with Migration Backgrounds' Decisions to Leave a Violent Relationship

This chapter has been published as:

Roegiers Mayeux, C., Saharso, S., Tonkens, E., & Darling, J. (2023). Institutional solidarity in the Netherlands: Examining the role of Dutch policies in women with migration backgrounds' decisions to leave a violent relationship. *Societies, 13*(11), 243. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13110243

Abstract

In the Netherlands, women who experience domestic violence can rely on public policies that aim to support them, such as shelters. Drawing on the lived experiences, through 10 interviews with women with different cultural backgrounds and nationalities staying in a shelter, and on 37 interviews with social workers working with these women, we observed that this support falls short for them. We argue that immigration rules, together with policies on domestic violence and housing, (unintentionally) often work in tandem with violent partners to prevent women with migration backgrounds from leaving violent relationships. The paper draws on a perspective of institutional considerations of solidarity to unpack the relations between domestic violence, cultural constraints, and public policies, but also looks at the positive experiences of women of migrant backgrounds with these Dutch policies. This research indicates that there is a lack of institutional solidarity towards women, especially those arriving as marriage migrants, who have experienced domestic violence. In exploring the intersections of domestic violence and often exclusionary state policies, the paper reflects on how the Netherlands can provide more support to those women and how intersectional justice and solidarity might be expressed.

Keywords: Domestic Violence; Institutional Solidarity; Marriage Migration; policy; the Netherlands; Women

2.1. Introduction

"My husband knew that if I left [him], I might ruin everything, so he blackmailed me: "If you leave, you will lose your papers, it's me who decides to send you back to your country". And I was afraid. Because I was new here, I didn't know the rules of this country, I was afraid to go to the police and tell them I'm living in hell." —Patience

Patience is a Moroccan woman who had a temporary residence permit to stay in the Netherlands that was dependent on her marriage to her Iraqi husband, who has Dutch citizenship. She eventually left him after experiencing two years of domestic violence (DV). In the Netherlands, domestic violence towards women is one of the most frequent forms of violence (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Domestic violence has, for a long time, been seen as a private issue inside the household. Even if shelters existed, survivors of violence were not protected by Dutch law. This changed in 1984 when, after a sustained period of pressure from feminist advocates and policy makers, the government implemented wide-ranging proposals to fight domestic violence (Roggeband, 2002; 2012). This can be seen as the first act of state solidarity towards women who survived DV.

Since 1984, the group of survivors impacted by this policy has become more culturally diverse. Women with migration backgrounds who have experienced domestic violence have become markedly represented in Dutch shelters (Jonker et al., 2012) —due to, among other factors, a less extensive social support network (Bartels, 2021) —and among them are women, like Patience, who are not Dutch citizens. When state policies on DV were developed, gender was foregrounded as a central concern within domestic violence. Cultural differences between women were not considered central to the fight against domestic violence (Roggeband, 2002). This raises the question of not only whether these women, who might have specific needs because of their cultural and migration backgrounds, receive adequate help from the Dutch state, but also, in the case of those who do not hold Dutch citizenship, whether the state takes responsibility for the well-being of this category of survivors. In addressing these concerns, this paper considers whether the Dutch state offers (enough) institutional solidarity to domestic violence survivors, especially with migration backgrounds. We understand solidarity as support offered to citizens in need (Arts & Gelissen, 2001). Our definition of institutional solidarity encompasses support from policies, as well as from professionals who mediate between these policies and the citizens to whom they apply. We utilize solidarity as a framework, as, among other reasons, it is what Dutch feminists used to give visibility to violence against women on the political agenda (Estrada Londoño, 2023).

This question of institutional solidarity is divided into three themes. The first theme considers the importance of policies and their implementation, focusing on the policy on DV itself and its relation to housing and sheltering. To what extent do women feel supported by these policies? The second theme concerns the role of professionals, exploring whether women feel supported by their (re)actions. Lastly, we examine the intersection between policies on domestic violence and migration, considering how policies on migration influence the policy on domestic violence. For example, to what extent do women with migration backgrounds—specifically marriage migrants—experience additional barriers due to having a different cultural background and nationality?

The Netherlands is used as a case study because it was one of the first European countries to institutionalize the fight against domestic violence in its policies (Roggeband, 2012). In this paper, we combine two research groups. We mainly draw on interviews with ten women from different

cultural backgrounds and nationalities staying in a shelter after experiences of violence, and on further interviews with thirty-seven social workers working with survivors. Although three of the survivors were born in the Netherlands, we use the heading "with a migration background" because all of them have at least one (grand)parent born outside the Netherlands. By doing this, we follow the official definition of the Dutch *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS, 2023)[1]. Before diving deeper into the intersections between marriage migration and domestic violence, we consider how the policy regarding domestic violence impacts all women, including those born in the Netherlands.

In the next section, we discuss the existing literature around cultural expectations, domestic violence, and marriage migration policies, with the latter focusing on the context of the Netherlands. We then outline the methodology before considering three analytical themes that highlight the connections between domestic violence, migration policy, and the challenges of escaping.

2.2. State of the Art

2.2.1. Domestic Violence, Culture, Gender, and Migration

Domestic violence (DV) is often examined in relation to culture (McCloskey et al., 2016; Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019; Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). For example, McCloskey et al. (2016) investigated the link between gender expectations and domestic violence across 24 Sub-Saharan African countries. They found that in 17 of these countries, more than half of the men interviewed believed they had the right to use violence against their wives if the latter argued, disagreed, or left the house without permission. However, such views were shown to vary depending on men's level of education. At the same time, the findings also suggest that in the remaining seven countries, men expressed less acceptance of violence, highlighting cultural differences in attitudes toward gender relations. Similarly, cultural values tied to honour and shame have been shown to discourage women from leaving abusive relationships. Aboulhassan and Brumley (2019), for instance, found that Arab American women often viewed divorce as harmful to a woman's reputation, which contributed to their decisions to remain in violent marriages.

Recent studies in the Netherlands have begun to examine the interconnections between domestic violence and experiences of marriage migration, linked to a specific type of migratory residence permit. De Hart et al. (2022) emphasised that the migrating partner, often a woman, is dependent on the resident partner. This leads to an unequal relationship between the partners and increases the risk of DV occurring. This also comes out of Bartels' research (2021), which focused on Moroccan women living in the Netherlands as marriage migrants and experiencing violence. She argued that both culture and Dutch policies play a role for women in (not) leaving violent relationships. Deportation to the country of origin may not be an option for a marriage migrant because of economic factors or because,

[1] The term 'with a migration background' was introduced to replace the term allochthonous. The term was widely criticized, including by Schinkel (2017). The term would imprison people, including those who are born in the Netherlands and hold Dutch nationality, in a perpetual otherness. The new term includes both (marriage) migrants and (Dutch) people of migrant background, without suggesting that the latter are still considered as migrants, and thus does more justice to their actual status.

as a separated woman, especially with a child, people could look down on her and she could be shamed—even if she received support from her family (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022).

In this article, we consider staying in a violent relationship to be the outcome of an intersection of different factors, including not only cultural expectations but also language barriers (Alaggia et al., 2017), family structures (Tur-Prats, 2019), personal reasons (Storer et al., 2021), and policy barriers (Gill & Sharma, 2007; Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). Researchers in Canada (Alaggia et al., 2017) have argued that women who lack knowledge of the language of the new country they migrated to experience language barriers at both the structural and personal levels. As an example, when they do not understand the language, they find it more difficult to explain their problems to professionals. The authors therefore plead for the need to deliver language-sensitive services so that professionals can reach all survivors of domestic violence. When diving deeper into family structures, Tur-Prats' (2019) research states that the perspectives on violence against women depend on the family type, such as who lives with the family, where the members of the family grew up, and other factors. When looking at personal reasons to stay with the violent partner, we see that having children, love, and the energy of leaving the situation play a role (Storer et al., 2021). Therefore, whilst we acknowledge the role of culture, other intersecting factors cannot be ignored, such as the role of policy.

2.2.2. Domestic Violence: An Institutional Perspective on Solidarity

Domestic Violence and Institutional Solidarity

In this paper, we employ a feminist sociological analysis, highlighting that domestic violence disproportionately affects women due to patriarchal structures and unequal power relations (Murray & Powell, 2011; Kuskoff & Parsell, 2021; DeKeseredy, 2021). Legally, and culturally, what constitutes domestic violence varies between countries (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). The definition of domestic violence adopted in this paper is that provided by the United Nations (Bogat et al., 2016), as it includes forms of coercive economic violence and is broader than operating only between married partners. The United Nations defines domestic violence as the following:

"a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone".

The Netherlands has its own definition of domestic violence, which includes physical, sexual, and psychological acts. However, forms of economic violence, such as not having the right to work outside of the household and being denied access to finances, are not considered domestic violence in this context (de Hart et al., 2022). Previous research from de Hart et al. (2022) has shown that economic violence occurs in many violent relationships, not least because domestic violence is often multilayered, reflecting a combination of several types of violence. Following this exclusion, we prefer using the United Nations' definition (Bogat et al., 2016)

The analytical framework used in this paper is institutional solidarity, expressed in policies and their practical implementations. In the case of DV, the implementations consist of organisations where survivors can report violence, shelters for those who need them, appointing professionals with specific expertise (i.e., providing expertise enhancement), and developing protocols so that professionals know how to act in case of (a suspicion of) violence (Mellaard, 2022).

Discretionary Freedom and Domestic Violence

Importantly, such institutions are interpreted not as a single body but as various interrelated actors, such as housing municipalities, care organisations, or migration administrations. Policies are important as they define the playing field in which these institutions operate. Policies, however, are carried out by policy officers and professionals— people working in education, healthcare, childcare, social and youth support, and justice, or what Lipsky (2010) calls 'Street-Level Bureaucracy'. Professionals in these fields are often described as having a discretionary freedom to interpret policy. How policies are conceived may therefore differ from how they are implemented in practice (Cuthill & Johnston, 2019). Professionals who deal with (suspicions of) domestic violence have a certain liberty to decide when acting on such suspicions. In the Netherlands, there is a reporting code for professionals in cases where domestic violence is known or suspected (Landelijk Netwerk Veilig Thuis, n.d.). According to this code, there are several steps to follow, such as discussing the situation with colleagues and the survivor. Next to this, professionals can reach out to *Veilig Thuis*[2] if they wish. However, they are not obliged to report (suspected) violence. They decide if they want to report, and this produces scope for discretion. General practitioners are an exception, as they have a duty of confidentiality, which means that they are obliged to keep confidential the information provided by patients. They are, however, strongly advised to initiate a conversation with the person experiencing violence and recommend institutional help (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). When children are involved, GPs have a duty to inform *Veilig Thuis.* This follows from their duty to protect children; experiencing or witnessing the violence is considered harmful to children.

2.2.3. The Dutch Policy on Domestic Violence

In 1984, the Netherlands was, as a result of feminist activism and advocacy, one of the first European countries to frame domestic violence as a state issue (Roggeband, 2002; 2012), compared to, among others, France in 1994 (Allwood, 2016), England in 1996 (Burton, 2008), and Spain in 1998 (Roggeband, 2012). Since 2009, an Act has been implemented wherein, in cases of acute threats of domestic violence, the police have the right to impose a restraining order of ten days on the violent partner (Roggeband, 2012; Bargellini, 2021). This restraining order exists so that the situation can be assessed. This period can be protracted to a maximum of four weeks if necessary. Moreover, in cases where violence has already taken place and been proven, a contact ban can be applied. When a woman can't stay in the house, it is recommended that they remain in a safe place. In cases where there is a lack of safe accommodation, cities have the right to give housing priority to survivors of violence, a policy called 'housing urgency'. The requirements for such a priority differ between cities (SUWR, 2023; Urgentiecommissie, 2023). In principle, every person experiencing domestic violence should be able to apply for 'housing urgency' independent of where they are located (Regelhulp, 2023). Research from Bargellini (2021), however, has shown that this is often more complicated, as there are additional

[2] *Veilig Thuis* (Safe at Home) (Rijksoverheids., n.d.) is a country-wide organization with expertise in domestic violence, such as intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and child abuse. Survivors and perpetrators can call *Veilig Thuis* for help. Moreover, the organization advises professionals when they have concerns or suspicions of violence. Next to listening to, among others, survivors of domestic violence, *Veilig Thuis* will investigate the severity of the situation. In case of a dangerous and urgent situation, especially when there are children present, *Veilig Thuis* has to start follow-up steps such as bringing the survivor(s) to a safer situation.

requirements that not every woman in danger can meet, such as a secure income. Moreover, because of the wider housing shortage in the Netherlands, women will more probably first spend some time in a shelter.

When there is no safe place and no possibility to find a new place to live in – due to, among others, being unable to ask for housing priority –, and there is no network to rely on, but there is a high likelihood of continued violence, survivors can go to shelters. Shelters are country-wide temporary emergency accommodations, and depending on the city, survivors can stay between six and nine months. Yet, research shows that women cannot always immediately go to a shelter (Bargellini, 2021). The shelter might not have the capacity to accommodate the women (and their children). Undocumented women and marriage migrants, in particular, may experience rejection from shelters due to both a lack of capacity within the shelters and their insecure immigration statuses. In these cases, we see the first examples of how the implementation of domestic violence policy may work out differently for those women born in the Netherlands (Bartels, 2021; Bargellini, 2021).

2.2.4. Domestic Violence and Immigration Policies

Marriage Migrants and Referents

A marriage migrant is a person who migrates to the country of the partner with whom they are legally bound, the referent (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). De Hart et al. (2022) indicated that in 2020, 12,585 marriage migrants received a residence permit in the Netherlands. The majority (62%) were women. This permit is temporary and is recognised as a "dependent residence permit". Until 2012, as a marriage migrant, one could apply for an independent residence after three years of marriage. The Dutch government, however, has raised the period to five years. In addition, the migrant must have a positive result on most of their integration exams completed within the first three years of arrival. If the migrant leaves their partner, or the referent legally ends the relationship, the marriage migrant may have to return to their country of origin (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). As a result, the temporary residence permit leads to a dependency relation between referents and marriage migrants, in which the latter is dependent on the former. In the case of domestic violence, such a dependent position can make it more difficult to end or escape the violence. One of the forms that domestic violence can take is coercive control, such as controlling the partner's actions (Tanha et al., 2010; Hamberger et al., 2017). Due to the additional dependency that leads to an unequal power relationship because of the temporary residence permit, this risk of control is increased. Dependency in marriage migration in the Netherlands can be found in three areas: legal, financial, and social. Legally, as has been the case since 2013, it is the responsibility of the referent to see to the integration of the migrant and to inform the IND (immigration and naturalisation service) when there are any changes in the residence status of the marriage migrant. These changes can lead to increasing inequalities in agency and power between referents and marriage migrants as the former can more easily withhold information about the latter's residence status (Sterckx et al., 2014; de Hart et al., 2022).

During this period, marriage migrants may also be financially dependent on the income of the referent. Whilst they are permitted to work, due to Dutch language barriers and unfamiliarity with the regulations of the country, starting employment is often initially complicated. Since 2013, there has also been more autonomy and responsibility placed on both referents and migrants in relation to integration, as they have the choice of how to prepare for the integration exam, testing Dutch values, norms, and language. Integration courses need to be paid for by the referent and the migrant, but

they can make use of a loan. As integration courses are not mandatory, neither the referent nor the marriage migrant can be punished (e.g., by receiving a fine). It is, however, in most cases, mandatory to participate in the integration exams; otherwise, the referent will receive a fine of a maximum of 4.080 euros (Het Juridisch Loket, 2023). There are examples of referents who refused to let their partners take the exams even if this led to fines (de Hart et al., 2022). The consequences for the marriage migrant are that she will experience more difficulties not only in learning the language but also in meeting other people. The lack of Dutch language skills and knowledge about the country can hinder women from gaining knowledge about leaving violent relationships and may increase social isolation and dependency on their partners (Sterckx et al., 2014; de Hart et al., 2022). Moreover, without passing the exams, it is almost impossible to obtain an independent residence permit.

In Case of Domestic Violence

If a marriage migrant experiences violence before the end of the five years and wants to leave her partner, she can apply for an independent residence permit based on humanitarian grounds (Bartels, 2021). To gain this permit, evidence of violence is necessary. A doctor needs to send (recent) medical data, and a social worker is required to submit a statement of proof of the survivor staying in a shelter (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). Research from Vergaert (2022) indicates that general practitioners in Belgium struggle with filling in such statements. If they state that the injuries are not bad enough, women might not receive the permit on humanitarian grounds. On the other hand, they also do not want to submit false reports. This is an area of considerable discretionary freedom (Lipsky, 2010), where general practitioners and social workers have a significant influence on the future of the women, as they have a certain liberty to fill in the statement.

Alongside data from professionals, recent records from the police are needed. These could be reports of domestic violence, but could also be statements from the police or prosecutor that a prosecution against the violent partner has been started. Reporting to the police itself is insufficient; it is necessary that the police act on the report or findings of their own to support a report (de Hart et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that this requirement for action on the part of the police makes addressing abuse more complicated. It is easier to receive the documented proof when there is the existence of physical or sexual violence. This can lead to problems for women who experience(d) other types of violence, such as isolation, economic dependency, and psychological violence (Bartels, 2021). De Hart et al. (2022) compared the Netherlands with other countries where, in the case of DV, a survivor can obtain an independent permit. As an illustration, in Germany, domestic violence includes physical and psychological violence. Furthermore, survivors do not need to report the violence. A statement by a friend or family member is sufficient. Compared to Germany, gaining evidence to prove violence is more complicated in the Netherlands. Next to challenging requirements, Bartels (2021) shows that marriage migrants do not always know that they can gain a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. Sometimes this is due to language barriers, but also—again—because it is the responsibility of the referent to inform the marriage migrant about their rights. It is thus notable that due to this 2013 policy change, coercion and control by the referent have become easier. In the following sections, the paper explores how these policies put women in vulnerable positions after experiences of violence and how this can change in the future.

2.3. Methodology

This research was carried out by a combination of interviews with female survivors and social workers, and participant observations. Regarding the survivors and a part of the social workers, the first author met them in a shelter in the province of South Holland, where she spent a year and a half undertaking participatory fieldwork. All participants received an information letter and provided their informed consent before each interview. All interviews were coded using ATLAS.ti. Subsequently, interview fragments were clustered using thematic coding. Non-English quotes have been translated. The women and social workers could choose their own pseudonyms at the end of the interviews.

2.3.1. Narrative Interviews

The narrative interviews with the ten women were carried out between June 2022 and March 2023. Each interview started with a question about the participant's life story before arriving in the shelter. More questions were then asked about the support and difficulties women experienced in leaving their partners. The aim of using narrative interviews was to give participants the space to tell their stories in a way that made them feel comfortable and able to retain control (Muylaert et al., 2014). The participants differed in age, religion, level of education, and ethnicity. The women were, at the time of the interviews, between 27 and 46 years old, and seven of them were born outside of the Netherlands (Table 1). Their cultural backgrounds were recorded based on their own choosing[3]. Regarding educational level, some started working around 14 years of age, and others graduated with a Bachelor's or Master's degree in the Netherlands or their country of origin. Four of the women were Hindu, four Muslim, and two non-religious.

Most women had voluntarily chosen their partners, except for one case where there was mention of an arranged marriage. Next to this, one woman had been married twice: once an arranged marriage in Suriname and once voluntarily in the Netherlands. In both marriages, she experienced violence, but we mainly focus on the last marriage, as it was in the Netherlands. The interviews were carried out in three languages, depending on which the woman preferred and the first author mastered, namely Dutch, English, and French. Other languages, such as Turkish or Arabic, were common in the shelter, but the resource constraints of this project precluded their inclusion. As a result, women with little knowledge of Dutch, English, or French were unreachable. We decided not to use an interpreter due to the sensitivity of the topic.

[3] We would emphasize that even if the women interviewed here have self-identified the same cultural background, their experiences were far from homogenous, due to the intersections of a range of other factors, including socio-economic status, family structure, and migration histories. Similarly, we recognise that the category of 'cultural background', even where self-identified as in this paper, reflects an imperfect categorisation that cannot fully encompass the complexities of individual identity and senses of cultural belonging and heritage. We use this categorisation here simply as a means to indicate the range of backgrounds of the women we worked with and to foreground their diversity of experience.

Table 1: Women's nationalities, self-identified cultural backgrounds, ages, and durations of stay in the Netherlands.

Nationality Before Marriage Migration	**Self-Identified Cultural Background**	**Age**	**How Long in the Netherlands?**
Moroccan	Moroccan	43	2 years and 6 months
Moroccan	Moroccan	27	1 year and 6 months
Surinamese	Hindu	46	6 years
Surinamese	Hindu	34	4 years
Iranian	Iranian	37	5 years
Pakistani	Pakistani	27	3 years
Dutch	Hindu–Dutch	31	Since childhood
Dutch	Hindu–Dutch	33	Born in The Netherlands
Dutch	Turkish	28	Born in The Netherlands
Dutch	Dutch (with Indonesian and Italian roots)	34	Born in The Netherlands

2.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Most of the data used in this article has been derived from interviews with the women noted above; however, they are underpinned by additional interviews with social workers working with women experiencing domestic violence. Thirty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with these social workers. Two of them were full-time managers, and thirty-five were social assistants of different types: child(ren)–mother, personal, residential, and ambulatory. Child(ren)–mother assistants coach children and their relationships with their mothers. Personal social workers work more individually with women around legal, social, and psychological issues. As an example, they accompany women to visit houses if they receive the possibility of 'urgency'. Residential assistants work in the shelter, providing first-line support and activities. Ambulatory social workers mostly assist the women from the latter's own places.

All these social workers were women between 22 and 66 years of age, consistently divided. A big part of the social workers were working in the shelter where the fieldwork was carried out. The other interviewees were working in the provinces of Gelderland, North Brabant, North Holland, Friesland, and Utrecht. This wider pool of participants was contacted through email, LinkedIn, and snowball methods. All the interviews were in Dutch. The social workers had different cultural backgrounds, including Dutch, Surinamese, Moroccan, Kurdish, Turkish, Maluku, Tunisian, Brazilian,

and Indonesian (Figure 1). Twenty-six of them had degrees in social work. Other common degrees were in psychology and pedagogy.

The information from the social workers for this article is based on questions on the role of the Dutch institutions, asked in interviews with a broader purpose. The first author assumed that social workers had knowledge of the practice of the policies, as they worked closely with those affected. As such, social workers were asked what they thought should change in the policy regarding domestic violence, especially considering the specific social groups they were working with. Personal and ambulatory social workers had more knowledge about policies because they were closer to the implementation and effects of these policies.

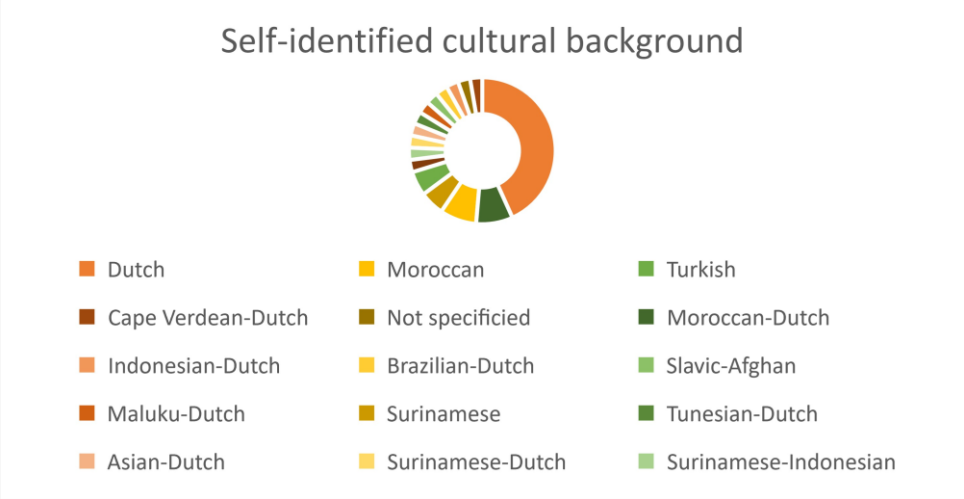


Figure 1: Self-identified Cultural Background of the Social Workers.

2.3.3. Participant Observation

Several observations made during the year and a half of fieldwork have also been drawn upon in this paper, anonymously. The conversations during observations were in the aforementioned languages with the addition of basic Spanish. Twice a week during the period of fieldwork, the first author helped in organising activities for children and the women, which also gave her the opportunity to have ongoing informal conversations with the latter.

2.4. Results

All the interviewed women had experienced policy-related difficulties that had added barriers to leaving their partners. To explore these factors, we focus on three themes. The first issue concerns the policy in practice, with a focus on housing and sheltering. The second topic is about the role of professionals. The final issue is about the intersection of domestic violence and migration policies and how policy change resulted in the state (unintentionally) working in tandem with violent partners to prevent marriage migrants from leaving violent relationships.

2.4.1. Policies on Domestic Violence in Practice

Women

The policy regarding domestic violence is broad and multifaceted. A key concern for the women was accommodation and sheltering. Yasmina, a woman with a Hindu–Dutch background, shared that it had taken her several times before she definitely left her partner. She had been separated

from him before, but had decided to start over because they already had a child, and culturally, it was expected that they should stay together. After several abusive incidents, however, she decided to leave with her children to stay with her mother. As she could not stay there with three children, she asked for housing priority from her mother's place. This, however, was impossible as she did not have a job and therefore had no salary to prove that she could pay the rent, despite having had a house before. She recounted being strongly advised by social services to stay in a shelter first and afterwards apply for 'urgency', and discussed the negative effects of this policy rule:

"I am holding this place for another woman with a family who really needs to leave now instead of tomorrow. But the place is occupied because I am here. Whereas I could have also waited for urgency with my mother."— Yasmina

Alongside staying in a shelter, there are other suggested requirements as well. As an example, in the policy, it is strongly recommended that survivors fill in a report, as this will make accessing a shelter easier. However, a lot of women shared, during interviews and observations, that they were afraid to report their partners. The women realised that their partners could have temporary restraining orders imposed on them, but feared what would happen after this period. They were afraid that their partners would react aggressively after the end of a restraining order. Besides, they feared the consequences of being sent back to their country, which intersected with being a marriage migrant, and their lack of knowledge about the migration policy. To be able to receive an independent residence permit on humanitarian grounds, they were obliged to fill in a report. For women with the fear of reporting, this was very conflicting. This was the case for Espoir:

"When I had to go to the other shelter, they said I needed to report first. I said: "I can't report for my safety", so they said that I will have to go back to Morocco."— Espoir

Though women were grateful for the possibility to stay in the shelter and to be able to receive support, most of them shared that they were angry that they had to leave everything behind. Often this involved their partners remaining in their houses whilst the women were in shelters that, as Sija expresses it, "*could feel like a prison*". The need to stay in a shelter especially affects women of migrant backgrounds, as they often have no other place to go due to having less extensive social networks, or other reasons, such as their families not being willing to have them back, as was the case for Patience:

". . .my father told my mother: "I only accept her dead." Because the honour of the family would crumble."— Patience

<u>Social Workers</u>

Social workers confirmed that while it is possible to ask for housing priority when not in a shelter, this rarely works in practice because of housing shortages. When discussing housing priority, four social workers mentioned having mixed feelings about the possibility of receiving 'urgency' if women are not in a shelter. On the one hand, they indicated fearing that it would be too easy to ask for a house and raised concerns over the possibility of abuse of the system. On the other hand, they also acknowledged that there are seldom enough rooms in shelters for new women who are in danger. Consequently, some women must wait before leaving or stay in a hotel until there are rooms for them and their child(ren). Several social workers believed that the best solution was for a woman to stay in the house and for the violent partner to leave, but that this rarely happened. The main reason for this is that at the end of a restraining order, there is too great a risk that the partner returns and has access to the house, as Sofia outlined:

". . . eventually the perpetrator goes back to the house and the wife and children have to leave anyway. What you often see is that it is very acute, that they must leave at once and leave everything behind. So, a restraining order… It's good that it's there. It is for a short period, it can be extended if necessary, but it turns out that it is not enough."— Sofia

Moreover, social workers pointed out that shelters are not accessible quickly due to bureaucratic processes, such as professionals first having to assess the level of danger, a waiting list before there is space in shelters, or encouraging women to report to the police. That the latter leads to fear for the women is also something that social workers indicated:

"That fear is valid, though. Even with the first report, you are not immediately placed in a shelter. There is still research to be done."— Cloë

Despite these concerns, Cloë noted that there was no obvious solution to these challenges because, without clear guidelines and referral processes, abuse of the shelter would be possible. In reality, though, she highlighted that she had rarely experienced women abusing this opportunity.

2.4.2. Implementation of Policy by Professionals

Women

Professionals had an important role to play for the women who had left their partners and arrived in the shelter. Most of them had found a listening ear for their stories and received advice on how to act. This was the case for all the women, regardless of migration background and civil status. Espoir, for instance, recalls that during her pregnancy, nurses came to her house to administer transfusions. She had not been able to speak freely about her situation because her husband had installed cameras in the house, but recalled that the nurses had shown concern:

"People came for my infuse and asked why I was always here alone, where my husband was. "I find it weird. Why are you so sick? Are your in-laws good with you?" They asked."— Espoir

Several women told professionals about the violent situations at home, but that they wanted to stay with their partners. Mary, a Pakistani woman in an arranged marriage, told her children's nurse about the isolation and psychological violence she experienced from her husband and family-in-law. Afterwards, she asked the nurse to keep this a secret because she wanted to try again, to be a 'better wife', as she explained it. For Mary, it was a matter of gendered cultural expectations that she wanted to follow. She even cut ties with the nurse. The latter respected that choice until several months later, when she heard that the situation had become worse. She then decided to step in and warned Mary that she should leave the house or could lose custody of her children.

"And then the nurse, she called me, and she said: "You must take a step for your children. If you won't, I will go to child custody, and we will take the children"."— Mary

Social Workers

It is thus notable that how professionals (re)act, as mediators of policy, can have a great impact on women's decisions to stay in or leave violent relationships. In cases such as Mary's, several social workers confirmed that many women had arrived in the shelter out of fear of losing their children. For example, Mona noted:

"Look, most of the women are here because Veilig Thuis told them: "If you don't leave that man, we will take your children"."— Mona

Alongside cases such as Mary's, social workers argued that most women had arrived in the shelters due to someone else referring them to these institutions after experiences of violence. Often, this was because they had no knowledge of these possibilities, for instance, as newly arrived marriage migrants.

2.4.3. Leaving a Violent Relationship as a Marriage Migrant

Women

The requirement to be legally bound to the referent for five years was known by all the women who had arrived in the Netherlands with this temporary permit, not least because, in many cases, their partners had used this as a threat to keep them in the relationships. For the women, this was one of the main reasons they had endured the violence longer than they would otherwise have chosen. For example, Prija stated:

"When I was finally allowed to naturalise for my Dutch citizenship, he [told the IND that they had to] stop my residence permit. So, everything then lapsed. It's been lost violent years." – Prija

Prija can now stay in the Netherlands as her child was born in the country. However, she cannot receive a permanent residence permit anymore on the grounds of marriage migration. Prija also shared how surprised she was that the authorities had not asked for her side of the story. This was not only the case for her, but can also be applied to other marriage migrants, indicating how much power the referent has as the figure with a responsibility to inform the authorities about the status of their spouse.

Fulfilling an integration exam is an additional mandatory requirement to obtain Dutch citizenship. However, four of the women interviewed had not been allowed by their partners to take civic integration courses or do other activities. This was notable, as they had arrived in the shelter with little or no knowledge of the Dutch language and of how the country works. None of these women had been in the Netherlands for three years, and so, they were not yet obliged to take an integration exam. In the cases of Mary and Espoir, they had only been allowed to go grocery shopping or leave the house for medical visits, and their mothers-in-law had to accompany them. They realised that these were ways to control them and served to restrict their ability to learn about their rights. Next to not being able to go out on their own, they had also not been allowed to have contact with people they knew or people that they may have encountered in their everyday lives, in or around their own houses. As an example, Espoir shared that after a while, she felt guilty for opening the door to the mailperson, as her partner had accused her of flirting with him. Also, five of six marriage migrants had not been allowed to open their own bank accounts. As some had been forbidden from attending integration sessions, they did not know how to do so for themselves. The excessive control experienced by these women meant that they had not met new people or gained knowledge of how the Netherlands is structured, further restricting the possibility of developing an awareness of DV and how to escape it.

In such a context, it is not remarkable that the women did not have any knowledge of the possibility of applying for a special permit on humanitarian grounds. For five of the women arriving as marriage migrants, the fact that it is the partner who is the gatekeeper to this knowledge led to more control over them. It was only in the shelter that most of the women heard, for the first time, that they could apply for a humanitarian permit. It brought them even more stress when they heard of the requirements to receive a residence permit on humanitarian grounds, because proof of

physical and/or sexual violence might already have disappeared. All of them had proof of violence on their phone, such as videos and messages, but this does not count as valid proof, as it could have been edited. Several of the women, such as Mary and Prija, were subjected to mainly, but not exclusively, psychological violence and isolation, experiences that were difficult to substantiate with physical evidence. All of this led to extra stress and insecurity for the women.

2.5. Discussion

2.5.1. Is There Enough Institutional Solidarity towards Women?

Is there institutional solidarity towards women who have experienced domestic violence in the Netherlands? Yes. The fact that there is a policy about it proves that the state wants to help survivors of violence. What we learn here in the context of the Netherlands is that the policy has been developed out of gender concerns and feminist activism. By doing so, the country was one of the first European countries to show its support to women experiencing violence (Roggeband, 2012). Over the years, the policy has been broadened by including the possibility of receiving an independent permit on humanitarian grounds for, among others, women arriving as marriage migrants. These groups of women can thus also apply for support from Dutch government institutions in the case of DV (de Hart et al., 2022). There are, however, still points for improvement that are experienced by the women.

First, in the study, women felt discouraged to leave their partners as they had to leave their homes behind or found it extremely difficult to meet the requirements of urgent housing from a temporary safe place, a point also noted in Bargellini's research (2021). For women with migration backgrounds, leaving the house can be even more difficult if their families do not want to stay in contact anymore and support them, or if they have less of a network in the Netherlands. A restraining order can be imposed upon their partner, but there are requirements for this, such as reporting the partner, which a lot of women fear doing. Such restraining orders are also often limited to ten days (with exceptions involving four weeks, if necessary) and are designed to allow for an assessment of the situation. Moreover, it can lead to insecurity if the partner comes back. This brings additional barriers, as there is also a lack of capacity in shelters. Because of this, some women must wait before they can be accommodated, notwithstanding the temporary nature of shelter accommodation (Bargellini, 2021). Again, when adding the component of marriage migration, those women can experience even more difficulties (de Hart et al., 2022).

The women shared that they had received support from professionals who worked for the state and who played an important role in putting policy into practice. Professionals had made use of their discretionary freedom (Lipsky, 2010) by, as an example, questioning situations where there were suspicions of domestic violence, which was the case with Espoir during her pregnancy. This discretionary freedom was also used to warn women to leave their abusive partners by saying that they could lose their child(ren). Whilst a challenging practice, this was discussed by the social workers as being carried out with the best intentions and out of an idea of solidarity; however, in cases involving women with other cultural backgrounds, this practice might not always respect their cultural values or be culturally sensitive. Moreover, as some women feel coerced to make the 'right' choice, it also disrespects their autonomous agency. Nevertheless, the professionals were generally appreciated by the women for being very supportive and making the most of the discretionary freedom to apply the policy.

Due to the migration policy, marriage migrants must legally be bound with their partner for at least five years before receiving independent Dutch citizenship (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022). This already leads to a power inequality in which the referent is the one being able to control the permit, but in the case of violence, this can be even worse, leading to contradictions in the solidarity that the state offers to survivors of DV. Hence, the dependency that comes from the policy presents a way for the referent to further control their partner and coerce the woman to stay with them. As integration became the responsibility of the referent and the marriage migrant, when the former does not want to pay, the migrant has fewer chances of meeting people and learning about the rules of the country. What we see here is that by fully placing the responsibility for integration on the referent, the state ignores any caring responsibility towards marriage migrants arriving as newcomers.

On the one hand, the Netherlands has enacted a possibility to receive an independent residence permit on humanitarian grounds, demonstrating, in theory at least, an act of solidarity. However, in practice, the requirements are complicated as physical or sexual proof of abuse is necessary, which is not always easy to establish (de Hart et al., 2022). Our findings showed that women have evidence on their phones, but that it is not considered valid. Social workers and general practitioners can indicate that violence has taken place to reinforce their possibility of obtaining an independent permit, but, as Vergaert (2022) has discussed, it can also be challenging for them to establish exactly what has happened. Social workers in our findings already worry about false accusations of domestic violence to receive 'urgency'.

Furthermore, women do not always know about the possibility of such a permit and of participation in civic integration courses, the former made clear by Prija in the findings. Access to this knowledge is the responsibility of the referent; they act as gatekeepers to such knowledge. In this context, even if there are possibilities for survivors of DV to ask for independent permits on humanitarian grounds and the integration courses and exams exist, the state can be said to (unintentionally) be empowering the partner at the expense of the marriage migrant.

As it stands, despite the Dutch state's intention to offer protection to survivors of DV, if these survivors are not (yet) Dutch citizens, such policies fail in their ambition. This is especially the case for women arriving as marriage migrants, where the control by referents is made possible by the Dutch integration policy, further entrenching potentially damaging power inequalities. Alongside this, the state's abdication of any responsibility to check on the well-being of newcomers further allows referents to use the lack of knowledge of marriage migrants to strengthen power over them.

2.5.2. Recommendations

Several issues that the women raised through this work are fundamental social concerns that extend beyond DV policy alone, such as a country-wide housing shortage. There are, however, small changes that are possible within DV policy that will make a positive difference. An example is offering urgent housing to a survivor of violence who can stay at one of her network's places. On paper, this should be the case, but we see in practice that it is not always enacted. This would lead to a faster transit in the shelter so that there is more space for other women in need to leave a violent situation. Next to this, restraining orders should be stricter and longer so that the survivor can stay in the house for a longer time and feel secure. Meanwhile, both survivors and perpetrators (and any other individuals involved in the violent situation) should receive adequate social support and help.

This requires, at a minimum, that all parties are aware that such support exists, which, as we saw, is not always the case with marriage migrants. Therefore, it is the duty of the state to inform the marriage migrant at their arrival about their rights. Practically, this could take the form of a letter in multiple languages.

All the interviewed women had received support from professionals. In cases of marriage migrants, this was necessary as they had not been aware of the help they could get from the state; since it is the responsibility of the referent to tell them, as such, there is no control of this key information from the state. This lack of control is exacerbated because integration courses are not mandatory. A recommendation is to make the lessons mandatory again and paid for by the state, and, in case of newcomers having children, to organise childcare to facilitate attendance. Another possibility is to ensure that social workers are able to support marriage migrants when they are not attending integration courses and to address potential barriers to their attendance. The courses would increase the likelihood that marriage migrants learn the language and learn about their rights. Another improvement would be, as suggested by the Dutch platform of Self-Determination and Residence Rights ("Platform Zelfbeschikking and verblijfsrecht", n.d.), that there is easier access to the permit on humanitarian grounds when there is any question of domestic and sexual violence. A concern might be that this leads to false claims about domestic violence; yet, the protection of survivors of violence should be prioritised. Not only would this be positive for migrant women if there were negative situations at home, but it would also make the Dutch state's ambition more substantive to show institutional solidarity to women of migrant backgrounds who are exposed to domestic violence.

Taking such debates forward not only involves questions for Dutch policies on integration, domestic violence, and the contemporary welfare state but also poses challenges for Dutch feminist organisations. As noted, these groups were central to shaping policies towards domestic violence in the 1980s and beyond, and today face the critical challenge of addressing the intersection between domestic violence and migration. It is only by facing the tensions between policies of protection for women of all backgrounds and immigration statuses and policies of migration control and citizenship that solidarity can be meaningfully enacted and expressed, both in policy and in practice.

2.5.3. Limitations and Further Research

This article also has limitations. First, the scale of this qualitative research was small, focusing on a small group of women in one shelter. However, this type of data cannot be developed by quantitative methods, such as surveys, because these cannot build the personal trust that is essential in working through the sensitivities and complexities of DV. A second limitation is that women without knowledge of French, Dutch, and English during interviews, and additionally Spanish during conversations in the shelter, were not able to participate, as the first author does not know other languages. Recently arrived marriage migrants, or women who had been isolated and had never learned the Dutch language, were therefore excluded. However, we anticipate that they are likely to have experienced the problems indicated in this paper. It is likely that these problems may have been exacerbated by their increased isolation and lack of mastery of the Dutch language. A third limitation is that our research focused on the experiences of women while still in the shelter and gained no knowledge of the (lack of) institutional solidarity they might experience after leaving the shelter.

Considering these limitations, it would be valuable for future work to repeat this research on a wider scale and with a broader range of common languages included, such as, alongside the aforementioned languages, Turkish or Arabic. Similarly, research that investigated the forms of institutional solidarity towards marriage migrants after leaving the shelter, including how the legal procedure for receiving an independent permit on humanitarian grounds proceeds and which factors may bring additional stress due to legal uncertainty, would offer additional and important insights to further these discussions and inform future policy development.

Chapter 3

Survivors' Experiences on the Dynamics of Family Solidarity following Domestic Violence

This article has been accepted to be published in the *Journal of Family Violence*, titled "Competing Solidarities: Experiences of Family Solidarity among Women Leaving a Violent Relationship"

Abstract

This article examines how cultural expectations shape family solidarity toward women leaving abusive relationships. Research shows that women's decisions to leave abusive relationships are influenced by many factors, with family support playing a crucial role. However, this support is often constrained by cultural expectations, such as stigma or shame surrounding separation. Drawing on a qualitative study of nine women from diverse cultural backgrounds—each raised with the belief that separation is undesirable—and insights from 15 social workers at a Dutch shelter, the study reveals that most women initially received limited family support. Families' responses ranged from pressuring women to obey their husbands to seeking compromise with in-laws, and only later did some relatives fully support the survivor's decision. This withholding of support was largely driven by cultural expectations discouraging separation. In cases where women reached shelters without family backing, social workers often intervened to mediate and rebuild family ties. The findings suggest that societal views portraying separation as shameful frequently delay or diminish family support, with solidarity sometimes emerging only after reconciliation efforts fail. In certain instances, a single relative proved vital in sustaining the survivor, highlighting the need for early interventions that identify and empower such allies to strengthen family support before women enter shelter services.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Women, Cultural Expectations, Family Solidarity, Social Work

3.1. Introduction

"I went to the park without telling my husband, which made him angry because I always have to ask permission. So he called my father to get his support because Pakistan is a very male-dominated country, and he thought that my father would blame his daughter, that he [her father] would say: "How dare you go without permission of your husband?" But my father just said, "I know my daughter very well. If you don't want to live with her, send her back and don't say bad things about her"."- Mary

Mary is a Pakistani woman who moved to the Netherlands as a marriage migrant to live with her husband. Her marriage was arranged by their families, who believed they would be a suitable match. However, after moving in with her husband and his family, Mary experienced manipulation and isolation. Despite her multiple efforts to tolerate the circumstances and stay in the marriage, as well as her parents already negotiating for more freedom, Mary eventually could no longer endure the violence and began to disobey her husband. Consequently, he contacted her parents, urging them to remind her of her obligation to obey him. Instead, her parents chose to support her decision, even though it challenged Pakistani societal and cultural expectations. Two weeks later, Mary left her husband and in-laws.

For many women experiencing domestic violence, the decision to leave an abusive relationship is not made in isolation, nor is it an impulsive act (Storer et al., 2021). Rather, it is a complex, often prolonged process shaped by a variety of factors, such as financial dependency (Renzetti, 2009), the presence of children (Rhodes et al., 2010; Heron et al., 2022), and—critically—the availability of support systems. While formal support may come from institutional sources, including social professionals and shelters (de Hart et al., 2022; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023), informal support, particularly from family, often also plays a decisive role in whether women choose to stay or leave (Wachter et al., 2021; Stulz et al., 2024).

Wachter et al. (2021) highlight that for women from cultural backgrounds where their freedom can be restricted due to societal and family expectations, the role of relatives becomes increasingly important in decision-making. In societies often described as collectivistic, where group interests may supersede individual needs, women frequently assess the cultural and social consequences of leaving a partner, even in cases of domestic violence (Güler et al., 2022). Consequently, family members may either reinforce detrimental gender expectations or stand in solidarity, supporting women even when such actions defy cultural expectations (Ahmad et al., 2009; van Hoorn, 2015; Güler et al., 2022; Hulley et al., 2023). However, considering cultural pressure, the decision to support may not be taken overnight (Latta & Goodman, 2011); instead, it may take time, just like the decision to leave.

While there is research on the importance of family support (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Pels et al., 2015; Hulley et al., 2023), few studies address the process in reactions of family members of a female relative who has experienced domestic violence, especially in cases where separation is seen as undesirable. In seeking to address this gap, this study draws on interviews with 9 survivors of domestic violence of multiple cultural backgrounds and residence status staying in a Dutch women's shelter, as well as with 15 social workers who assist these women. The research seeks to understand not only whether the women experienced support, but also how and why it was offered—or withheld—among different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, we looked into the role social workers play once the women were in the shelter and in need of institutional support. As such, the research focused on examining: "How did women experience their relatives' decision-making process when considering leaving a partner, and in

what ways did social workers assist in reaching positive relationships between women and their relatives?"

The concept of solidarity is central to this inquiry and is defined in this article as an active, embodied practice involving personal or social sacrifice to assist others (Prainsack & Buyx, 2011). In this sense, solidarity differs from passive forms of support: it implies taking a risk—whether emotional, social, or material—on behalf of someone else. By examining family dynamics and solidarity in this way, the study considered intersecting influences such as migration status, cultural values, and the role of social workers in mediating family relationships. Ultimately, this research aims to inform more culturally responsive interventions by identifying ways to engage families as potential allies, rather than obstacles, in the process of leaving domestic violence.

3.2. State of the Art

3.2.1. The Influence of Cultural Expectations on Leaving a Relationship

Domestic violence against women is a pervasive global issue that has been thoroughly researched, particularly regarding why women choose to leave, or remain in, abusive relationships (Yamawaki et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2010; Clark, 2016; Heron et al., 2022). A significant insight from this body of research is that the decision-making process of survivors is not straightforward; rather, the act of leaving or seeking help is a complex, non-linear journey (Liang et al., 2005; Domenech del Rio & Sirvent Garcia del Valle, 2019). For example, studies in Spain suggest that women evaluate the level of abuse before deciding to seek help (Domenech del Rio & Sirvent Garcia del Valle, 2019).

Several factors influence the decision to stay, such as the normalization of abuse (Clark, 2016) and the fear of not being believed (Heron et al., 2022). Additionally, cultural and societal perspectives on partner separation significantly influence attitudes and perceptions. In multiple cultures, separation, especially for women, is often viewed as socially and culturally undesirable, even in instances of domestic violence. Gender expectations frequently shape women's behaviour (Ahmad et al., 2009; Tabassum, 2016; Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). For example, as noted by Tabassum (2016), in Pakistan, marriage is often characterized by expectations of obedience, loyalty, and passivity from women, while male figures are seen as controlling and protective. These cultural expectations contribute to growing up with the stigma attached to separation, rendering it shameful and taboo, even in abusive situations.

Ahmad et al. (2009) examined first-generation South Asian female migrants in Toronto, asking them why they did not seek help from their families after experiencing violence. Many expressed concerns about social stigma affecting both themselves and their families, fearing they would burden their parents with the shame associated with a failed marriage. Furthermore, for some, witnessing their mothers suffer reinforced the belief that women must endure abuse to maintain family honour. This illustrates the significance of collective thinking and the intergenerational transmission of shame, where women remain in abusive relationships to shield their families from social stigma.

These cultural expectations also extend to how family members of domestic violence survivors react when approached by individuals wishing to leave their partners. Research produced mixed findings; some studies indicate that familial loyalty, honour, or stigma can lead to relatives pressuring women to stay (Güler et al., 2022; van Hoorn, 2015), while others showed that they can provide essential support

in the decision to leave, even when they challenge dominant patriarchal expectations (Ahmad et al., 2009; Hulley et al., 2023).

3.2.2. The Role of Family Support in the Case of Domestic Violence

Extensive research, both internationally and in the Netherlands, has highlighted the critical role of informal networks—particularly family dynamics—in decisions to leave abusive relationships (Prosman et al., 2014; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Pels et al., 2015; Hulley et al., 2023). Several studies have shown that disclosing abuse to family members does not automatically lead to supportive responses. Survivors often initially encounter disbelief, shock, minimization of the violence, or even blame (Lempert, 1997; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). In some cases, relatives withdrew or became unsupportive when their advice was not followed by the survivor (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014).

In the Dutch context, Pels et al. (2015) found mixed responses from families of women with migration backgrounds, with some reporting support and others not. Similar patterns emerged in research involving both Dutch women and women of migration backgrounds in the Netherlands (Prosman et al., 2014) and women from diverse cultural backgrounds in the UK (Hulley et al., 2023). Importantly, research has indicated that reactions within social networks can evolve; support is not always immediate but may develop over time (Trotter & Allen, 2009; Latta & Goodman, 2011). Furthermore, Pels et al. (2015) observed that initially unsupportive family members might become supportive, especially when influenced by others in the network. The presence of a single supportive relative can significantly impact a survivor's decision to leave (Hulley et al., 2023).

While much of the literature addresses women from a broad range of backgrounds, this article focuses on those for whom separation is seen as undesirable. Moreover, there are intersecting factors such as immigration status, relationships with in-laws, and professional support that also shape the experiences of the women we worked with, and which must be considered.

3.2.3. Kinship and Friendship Ties

In cultures where arranged marriages are practiced, it is not uncommon for women to marry a person their parents know, such as a family relative like a cousin (Bittles, 2012). The presence of familial ties between the woman's family and her in-laws can introduce additional layers of complexity. While the woman may already be acquainted with her husband and his family, which could potentially decrease the risk of violence, research has argued that cousin marriage, for instance, may be associated with an escalation in violence, including the potential for honour-based violence (Campbell, 2024). This can extend to the involvement of other relatives, potentially jeopardizing the family's reputation and leading to further challenges in addressing the issue. In certain instances, honour-based violence may be employed as a means to restore the family's reputation or to regulate the woman's behaviour (Campbell, 2024).

How this relationship changes and influences the support might also depend on the reactions of the family of the violent partner. For instance, they might be protective of the survivor but may also be contributing to the violence itself (Roomani et al., 2016; Somasekhar et al., 2020). Research in New Zealand with Indian women showed that because of the additional violence from mothers-in-law, the survivor's situation can be more vulnerable, and their ability to leave an abusive situation can be further constrained due to control from their in-laws and isolation from the external world (Somasekhar et al., 2020). In the Netherlands, research has shown that in-laws are principally of influence among families of Turkish, Moroccan, and Hindustani background (Pels et al., 2015; Bartels, 2021). In-laws can go from

being supportive to working against the survivor in favour of their child (Pels et al., 2015). In Bartels' research (2021) on Moroccan women with a marriage migration permit in the Netherlands, her participants often had bad experiences with their in-laws; they stole the money earned by the women, treated them badly, or even abandoned them during holidays in Morocco. Therefore, if the in-laws are not condemning the violence, or even participate in it, but there are close ties with the survivors' family, the latter getting involved can lead to additional tensions (Campbell, 2024).

3.2.4. Migration History, Residence Status, and Economic Dependency

It is essential to recognize the impact of a range of additional factors that influence family members' decisions to support a woman. For example, even if relatives agree that the woman should leave an abusive relationship, they might lack the space to house them (Bargellini, 2021) or may live too far away (Wachter et al., 2021). According to Wachter et al. (2021), women who migrate encounter obstacles in seeking support due to the physical distance from their family members. Relatives may be unable to assist with accommodation, such as finding housing or shelters in the woman's current country. Further complicating this situation are the cultural and legal differences that can lead to feelings of isolation and hesitation to seek formal help. First-generation women in new countries often face additional challenges, issues that supportive family members may be unable to address or that can become more stressful when support is lacking. For instance, refugees or marriage migrants may have a dependent residence permit that complicates their ability to report violence or leave an abusive partner (Sterckx et al., 2014; Voolma, 2018; de Hart et al., 2022). Moreover, a lack of familiarity with regulations or language barriers can impede women and their families' access to necessary information (Wachter et al., 2021).

Previous work has highlighted these challenges, particularly for marriage migrants who are in vulnerable positions due to their dependent residence permits linked to their legal relationships with Dutch citizens (Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). If the relationship ends within the first five years of residency, the marriage migrant risks being sent back to their country of origin. Although they can apply for independent residence permits as survivors of domestic violence, proving this status is challenging. This can result in negative repercussions, influenced by cultural pressures and financial burdens on families who must support the marriage migrant again (de Hart et al., 2022). If the survivor lacks personal financial resources and her broader social network is also unable to assist, she may experience economic dependency, making it even harder to leave an abusive partner (Renzetti, 2009). Therefore, even if relatives denounce the violence, their capacity to provide support may be limited due to multiple factors (Renzetti, 2009; Sterckx et al., 2014; de Hart et al., 2022).

3.2.5. Professional Support of Social Workers

While cultural expectations and the factors outlined above may create difficulties in receiving and providing solidarity, professionals such as social workers can play a crucial role in facilitating solidarity. Social workers assist women on multiple levels, such as before women decide to leave an abusive relationship and after they have left. The former involves domestic violence policies implemented by professionals (Roggeband, 2002; 2012). For example, when social workers suspect, or are aware of, violence, they have discretion in how to address it (Cuthill & Johnston, 2019; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). Their actions can significantly impact the survivor's future, especially when children are involved. Professionals can encourage or warn women to leave abusive situations to avoid having their children taken into custody (Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023), which can also influence family members' reactions. Once the survivor is in a shelter, social workers may also play a vital role. They can help

women receive an independent residence permit on humanitarian grounds following domestic violence (Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). Moreover, they can help women to identify family members and individuals important for their future, using tools such as genograms, ecograms, or culturagrams to map the family tree and the roles of different relatives (Elaine Congress & González, 2012). These methods help identify protective factors and opportunities for support, as family support is a central goal for social workers (Alexander, 2020).

Past work has highlighted that family support is a crucial factor in the decision-making process of women leaving a violent relationship (Prosman et al., 2014; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Pels et al., 2015; Hulley et al., 2023). However, this is not a straightforward decision, particularly in cases where separation is in general culturally disapproved (Ahmad et al., 2009).

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1. Research Design

The present article focuses on a specific case within a particular shelter, but it is part of a larger study that employed a narrative research approach. This broader study explores the intersections of domestic violence, gender, cultural background (including migration history), and social work. By using a narrative framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of how stories are interwoven, as well as how they are socially constructed and contextualized (Creswell et al., 2007). The larger study involved 47 interviewed participants, including 10 women and 37 social workers, two of whom were full-time team leaders. For this paper, the sample included narrative interviews with 9 women and semi-structured interviews with 15 social workers, all associated with the same shelter.

3.3.2. Recruitment Process

To reach the women, the first author explained during a monthly shelter meeting with them that she wanted to conduct interviews, the purpose of which was clarified. Additionally, it was mentioned that the interviews would be recorded anonymously, and participants could opt out at any time. They were invited to request more information afterwards or whenever the first author was at the shelter. This prompted two women to express their willingness to participate. Additionally, the first author asked other women to join. Thus, both purposive and convenience sampling were utilized (Gentles et al., 2016): convenience sampling within a certain context (the shelter) occurred by inviting participants during the group meeting, while purposive sampling involved selecting specific individuals. Two women declined, feeling uncomfortable sharing their experiences. Three others hesitated, requesting time to think it over, later agreeing with the understanding that it would potentially be useful for women in similar situations in the future. Another woman expressed interest but left the shelter before a date could be arranged. A key criterion was that participants spoke one of the languages that the first author was fluent in, namely Dutch, English, and French. While Dutch women were not excluded, the focus was on recruiting survivors from diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly those with first-generation migration histories.

All social workers for this article were affiliated with the same shelter. Purposive sampling was conducted as there were certain requirements that needed to be fulfilled. To take part in the interviews, the social workers needed to have knowledge of the same language as the first author and have at least five months of experience in the field of domestic violence. The first author personally invited twelve social workers, while three were contacted through email.

3.3.3. Data Collection

The interviews with the women started in mid-June 2022. The duration of these interviews was between 25 and 100 minutes. The initial idea of the study was to conduct narrative interviews with all the women. However, one woman had difficulties sharing her experiences and expressing herself; therefore, the interview lasted no longer than 25 minutes. Thus, in theory, only eight of the interviews can be categorized as narrative interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded. Before the interview, respondents received a consent form and an information letter in Dutch, French, or English, depending on their language preference. The first author also read both the documents together with each interviewee to make sure that they understood the research and to emphasize that they may stop whenever they wish during the interview. All participants provided written consent.

The questions were concentrated on the support and difficulties women experienced in leaving their partners. During their explanation, they were asked to elaborate on what they were saying. The interview ended with a vignette created by the first author, which put the women in an external and advising position. They received a picture of a woman who might be considered unhappy-looking, standing next to a man. At the same time, the first author told them an invented story about a woman who left her husband because of the violence she experienced and was subsequently staying in a shelter. During her time there, her sister called her to tell her that she had brought shame to her family and that they were all angry because of her leaving. They want her to return to her partner to avoid the negative consequences of dishonour associated with her departure. After the story, the women were asked what they would do if they were this woman and why they would react this way. The aim behind the utilization of this vignette was to make it easier to talk about their own experiences when they had experienced difficulties with family support. Vignettes are often utilized in interviews that address sensitive subjects (Jenkins et al., 2010). This methodical approach enables participants to share their personal experiences, particularly those that are sensitive, by situating them within different scenarios. Furthermore, vignettes can encourage participants to discuss the subject matter with greater comfort (Benedetti et al., 2018). It is noteworthy that during the question of the vignette, when women did not experience support from (some of their) relatives, they took the example of themselves and talked more about their situation. Each interview concluded with respondents choosing a pseudonym.

Most of the data used in this article derives from interviews with the women noted above; however, their experiences are complemented by general insights of social workers. All the interviews were between 40 and 90 minutes and carried out in Dutch. Social workers were given a consent form and an information letter in Dutch, which they read together with the first author before starting the interview. The experiences of the social workers were primarily focused on the arrival of women they had already worked with, and the women's request for professional assistance in addressing the unsupportive behaviours of family members whom they wished to reconcile with, without going back to their partner. These insights are, of course, not only based on their experiences of the nine women in this study but also on other women who have lived in the shelters, offering a broader perspective on the challenges social workers have encountered throughout their careers when supporting women facing domestic violence. All social workers who were interviewed carry a self-chosen pseudonym.

3.3.4. Participants

Nine women of diverse age groups, religious beliefs, educational levels, and nationalities participated in the interviews. At the moment of the interviews, the youngest was 27 years old and the oldest was 46 years old. Four of these respondents grew up in the Netherlands, whilst the others moved during

adulthood for reasons of marriage migration. One of the latter had already received her independent residence permit and Dutch citizenship following marriage migration. All of the women were asked how they would define their cultural background, and various answers were given (Table 1). Even though the cultural backgrounds in question were different regarding categorization, it was a conscious decision to preserve these aspects to respect the women's autonomy in determining their identity in their own terms. Hence, the provided cultural backgrounds are derived from nationality, as well as religious affiliation and ethnicity. Despite these differences, all the women had a common experience, namely the fact that they grew up with the belief that separation is undesirable, mainly due to the cultural expectations they were educated with.

There was a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds represented in the group, extending from a woman being married off at the age of 14 for economic reasons, to another growing up in a middle-class background. Regarding educational background, there was also a difference: from quitting school as a minor to graduating with a master's degree in the country of origin. Most respondents identified as Muslim, followed by Hindu, and then non-religious. Eight of the nine women voluntarily chose their partner. The ninth respondent was in an arranged marriage with an acquaintance of her family. Of the eight women who were voluntarily married to a selected partner, one had been married twice. The first marriage was in their country of origin and arranged. She experienced violence in both marriages. Five interviews were carried out in Dutch, two in Dutch and French simultaneously, and two in English. Arabic and Turkish were other common languages in the shelter, however, unknown to the first author. We decided not to make use of an interpreter due to the sensitivity of the topic.

Pseudonym	**Nationality**	**Self-Identified Cultural Background**	**Residence Status in the Netherlands**
Patience	Moroccan	Moroccan	Marriage Migration
Espoir	Moroccan	Moroccan	Marriage Migration (child born in the Netherlands)
Mary	Pakistani	Pakistani	Marriage Migration (child born in the Netherlands)
Sparky	Iranian	Iranian	Marriage Migration (child born in the Netherlands)
Saawi	Surinamese	Hindu	Citizen, first Marriage Migration
Yasmina	Dutch	Hindu-Dutch	Citizen
Nadia	Dutch	Hindu-Dutch	Citizen
Zeynep	Dutch	Turkish	Citizen
Sija	Dutch	Dutch (Indonesian-Italian roots)	Citizen

Table 1: Women's Pseudonyms, Nationality, Self-Identified Cultural Background, and Residence Status

The social workers were at the time of the interviews between 24 and 64 years old. All had Dutch citizenship but had different self-chosen descriptions of their cultural backgrounds, going from Dutch, Cape Verdean, Surinamese, Moroccan, Tunisian, Brazilian, Indonesian, Hindu, and a combination with

Dutch. Similarly to the women, despite the variation in the categorization of cultural backgrounds, no changes have been made to preserve their autonomy.

They all had a degree in the social fields, such as social work, psychology, and pedagogy. Yet, as in the Netherlands, shelters are institutions that fall under the umbrella of social work; therefore, professionals working in and with shelters are considered social workers. The roles have been divided into four different types. Most of the latter were residential (n = 7) and personal (n = 4) assistants, however, there were also child(ren)-mother (n = 2) and ambulatory (n = 2) social workers. Although they all worked together, ambulatory social workers assisted women in their own homes. Residential assistants, on the other hand, supported women in the shelter and provided activities. Personal assistants were most of the time also based in the shelter, but not exclusively, as they accompanied women on a legal, social, and psychological basis. Some assistants were tasked with a special focus on the dynamics between the children and their parents, and specifically encouraged to strengthen the autonomy process of the children.

Pseudonym	**Self-Identified Cultural Background**	**Professional Role**
Cloë	Cape Verdean-Dutch	Residential Assistant
Eveline	Dutch	Personal Assistant
Juudje	Brazilian-Dutch	Residential Assistant
Katharina	Dutch	Residential Assistant
Maryam	Moroccan-Dutch	Child(ren)-parent Social Worker
Mina	Tunisian-Dutch	Residential Assistant
Mona	Surinamese	Residential Assistant
Naya	Afghan-Slavic	Personal Assistant
Niya	Moroccan	Residential Assistant
Nour	Moroccan-Dutch	Ambulatory Social Worker
Nynke	Dutch	Personal Assistant
Rosa	Hindu-Dutch	Personal Assistant
Sara	Moroccan-Dutch	Ambulatory Social Worker
Sofia	Moroccan	Child(ren)-parents Social Worker
Yvonne	Indonesian-Surinamese-Dutch	Residential Assistant

Table 2: Social Workers' Pseudonyms, Self-Identified Cultural Background, and Professional Role

3.3.5. Data Analysis

Seven of the nine interviews with the women were transcribed by the first author. The other two were transcribed by a professional transcription company. All interviews with the social workers, excluding the first one, were transcribed by the same company. The first author anonymized the interviews before sending them to the company. Once returned, they were coded using ATLAS.ti. The first author coded the interviews through a narrative approach, looking at recurring patterns and themes. Afterwards, the aim was to create a coherent story paying attention to the contexts and factors that play a role in the decision-making process of support-giving from family members. By using a narrative approach, the aim was to recreate the experiences the women had in their journey of asking and

receiving support, and which emotions that were combined with this (Creswell et al., 2007). This approach aims to be more engaging and to allow for a deeper understanding of the experiences of women. Moreover, the insights of the social workers were added to confirm stories and experiences of the women in practice, but also the broader target group of women residing in the same shelter. Non-English quotes have been translated.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Before Disclosing: Family has no Active Knowledge of the Violence

For all the women, the first weeks of being with their previous partner and, if applicable, their in-laws were good. For instance, Mary visited the Netherlands before officially living there. During that time, her in-laws welcomed her most kindly:

"So, during summer vacations, I came here to extend my visa, and then I went back [to Pakistan]. Those 20 days were like the best days of my life (laughing). My husband was so nice and took me shopping and everywhere. And my family, my mother-in-law, and all were very nice because they are living here [in the Netherlands] too." – Mary

She was shocked when her husband and in-laws started reacting in another way towards her once she lived with them. Other women, who married the partner they selected, had similar experiences: they were optimistic about their futures together, but then their partner started changing. At first, none of the survivors wanted to tell their family members about the violence they had to endure. The fact that they chose their partner voluntarily is one of the reasons why they did not want to. Another reason was that they did not want to bother their family with the burden of a failed marriage. In two cases, women shared that their parents had a suspicion of violence but did not bring it forward. For example, Yasmina recounts that her mother knew that her daughter did not have the best relationship, but did not know about the abuse. However, she sometimes asked her daughter about the situation, especially once Yasmina's oldest son started uttering phrases that raised concern, such as "bam mama". Nevertheless, as her mother was unsure, she did not say anything. Espoir, for instance, kept the violence to herself for several months, even lying to her parents when they were asking how her first Eid was with her in-laws:

"*My mother and my father called from Morocco: "How is the first party with you and family?" I said "yes, good, good", but really it was bad.*" – Espoir

In general, close relatives did not know of the violence until it became too much for the survivors to keep it to themselves.

3.4.2. Disclosing the Violence: Hopes and Realities

<u>Barriers to Support</u>

For many women interviewed, sharing their experiences of abuse with family members for the first time was a moment of vulnerability and hope, in which they looked for validation, protection, and change. Five women initially encountered disbelief instead. This was true for Sparky as well; her parents struggled to grasp the seriousness of the situation, considering Sparky's partner had always been helpful to them. It took several attempts before her family began to provide support. She reflects:

"Of course, they didn't know how bad the situation is, so, of course, they were like: "You sure you don't want to stay, [to] try more?" But then later, when I told them clearly, they supported me without a doubt". – Sparky

This pattern was not unique. For several women, family members initially responded by urging them to try harder to maintain the relationship. Some relatives minimized the violence by framing it as isolated incidents or temporary challenges. Relatives also argued that the women should try harder to endure because of the children or financial dependency. For instance, Sija heard from her mother that: "*We should have stayed together, because we have a child*" (Sija). Although Sija left, one of the reasons she delayed this decision at first was because of her mother's opinion. Moreover, her decision to leave caused a break with her mother.

In the case of Saawi, financial difficulties were cited as the reason for her father's inability to assist her with her first husband in Suriname. He had arranged her marriage at a very young age due to the family's economic struggles:

"My father said that taking care of five children [was] heavy, so the two oldest daughters he is going to marry off. That was my sister and me." – Saawi

Due to the violence she experienced in her first marriage, and knowing that returning to her father wouldn't be welcomed because of financial difficulties, Saawi decided to leave with a new partner living in the Netherlands. However, this person also became violent. The difference from the first time is that she was now stranded in a country with no direct relatives to talk to, unlike her first marriage, which made it harder to leave.

Culture-Specific Barriers

In addition to financial reasons and the presence of children, cultural expectations often dictated that women should remain in their marriages regardless of the circumstances. Sparky explained that in Iran, women like her in abusive relationships do not leave for plenty of reasons, such as losing their children. If a woman divorces her husband, he gets custody of the children. Moreover, women fear for their reputation. While there are differences across the country, the cultural expectations of staying married and the fear of stigma are still important:

"In Tehran, it is not like that anymore, but in smaller cities, those places still have those cultural rumours; it is still there. I see others also staying with their husband, living a miserable life, and there is nothing they can do." – Sparky

For Patience, it was slightly different. She had hoped to receive solidarity and guidance when sharing with her family that her husband was abusive, but got a contrary response:

"My mother said that I had to accept it [the violence]. That he is my husband, it's our culture, and it's the man who holds the power. He gives the orders, and I have to obey them. Otherwise, I'll have to sleep in the streets." – Patience

Keeping up the family reputation and honour were the primary reasons they did not stand in solidarity with her in a divorce: "*My dad told my mom: "I only accept her dead", because the honour of the family would crumble*" (Patience). None of her family members wanted to keep in touch with her, except for her younger brother living in France. At one point, she asked for help from her uncle living in the Netherlands. She reached out to him, not to accommodate her, but to ask if he could talk with her

previous husband, to condemn the violence. However, the uncle said that it was none of his business and that he could therefore not help her. Patience shared during a conversation that if he had reacted more positively, she would have left her previous husband earlier instead of enduring the violence. She might not have been supported by her family in Morocco, but would at least have benefited from people closer to her in whom she could confide. How the presence and help of people in the Netherlands are influential will be elaborated in subsequent sections.

This fear of gossip, stigma, and damaging family honour is something that women noted they were aware of even before they were considering a divorce. For several families, that also means that it's a binary choice; you leave your partner and lose us, or you stay and keep us. This led to women losing their family members, such as Patience:

"Now I have no contact with my parents. Yeah, they don't agree with the divorce, they don't agree with the choice I made because I'm the one who chose to marry that man." – Patience

Additional Lack of Support from In-Laws

In five cases, in-laws were aware of the violence and, especially the mothers, had a prominent role to play in it. For Saawi, her in-laws were supportive; however, this was unique. For instance, Espoir saw her mother-in-law frequently, as at the start, she could only do groceries with her. During other moments, she was isolated from the external world. At first, her mother-in-law negotiated with her son to make Espoir's life better, such as by persuading him to give Espoir more freedom. For instance, her mother-in-law talked to him about letting Espoir see her aunt. However, once Espoir was tired of his behaviour and had already explained to her parents that she did not want to stay anymore, her mother-in-law started changing as well and siding with her son:

"My mother-in-law said that I am back here because I have no place. And she said: "If you want to go back to Morocco, he is going to send you. If you are going to stay here, you should not leave. Your papers are going to stop"." – Espoir

From that moment onwards, Espoir felt threatened by her mother-in-law. For Nadia, Mary, and Zeynep, their mothers-in-law were protective of their sons from the start and even reinforced the violence. For Zeynep, it was the relationship with her mother-in-law that led to the final decision to leave her partner. Although many times she could endure her partners' violent encounters, the additional ones from her mother-in-law made it unbearable.

In Mary's case, she stated that*: "I'm not saying my husband was nice to me, but my mother-in-law played a great role in my whole situation*". Examples of the mother-in-law's behaviour were bossing Mary around and telling her that what she was doing was wrong. However, the fact that Mary married the son of a friend of her parents, and thus that there were close ties within the family, made it even more difficult to leave him, in addition to cultural expectations. Therefore, the families first tried to find a solution that would not end the marriage, but would end the abuse.

Family Mediation Attempts: Between Protecting Reputation and Addressing Violence

Women often remained with their partners following receiving negative reactions to disclosing violence. However, they continued to inform their families about the evolving situation, which led several family members to take action. After sharing more stories of abuse, four women remembered that their family members did not directly advise leaving but sought to mediate with their partners and, if applicable, the in-laws. This approach kept the issue within the family, preventing potential

stigmatization. For instance, Mary's brothers and father engaged with her former husband and his family to advocate for her freedom. She could reach out to them, and they would attempt to find solutions from afar, as they still resided in Pakistan. Over the years, numerous discussions took place. When her father-in-law visited Pakistan, Mary's father requested him to discuss better living conditions for her and the children. These dialogues resulted in temporary reductions in violence, only for it to resume later. A similar scenario unfolded for Patience, where her brother acted as a mediator. While he would have supported her decision to divorce, he was also conscious of gendered cultural expectations around separation. Initially, he communicated with Patience's ex-husband to confront his violence and insisted it must cease if they hoped to maintain any relationship. His efforts led to a brief period of calm, but that did not persist.

When Yasmina revealed the violence to her family and felt uncertain about how to proceed, all her relatives, except her father, sought to support her. Her father maintained that she couldn't separate due to cultural expectations and the children. In contrast, her brothers decided to confront her partner more assertively. They warned him that if he became violent again, he would face consequences from them as well.

"We'll finish him. That was the first reaction of my brothers. I'm the youngest one home. [they were]: "You're my little sister, and how dare he?" So that's an initial reaction of: "we're going to talk to him, we'll teach him a lesson." – Yasmina

When the initial attempt to resolve the problem in this way did not work out, some family members decided to change their perspective and be fully in solidarity.

<u>When Family Stands With Survivors</u>

Some women were lucky to immediately have a supportive relative once they announced wanting to leave their partner. Nadia, for instance, only told her mother after some months and immediately received a reaction of support:

"*I told her later, "Mom, I have to tell you something. All the injuries that you saw were not from falling, they were not from accidents. But that was purely from him hitting me. And that made my mother very angry. My mother then also immediately said, "I'll get you out of there"."* – Nadia

Her mother was not concerned with cultural expectations or staying together for the children. Her main concern was her daughter's safety.

Saawi arrived as a marriage migrant alone, but considered her in-laws as close family members. When she undertook steps to leave her partner, her in-laws were on her side, even encouraging her to leave and report him.

"I was going to keep it a secret from them [mother- and sister-in-law], but they are so smart. If they suspected that I was mistreated, they were going to say they have a very nice blouse, or they have dresses, and they want me to try them on. Because then they come along. I was shy, but they didn't leave. I had to try it on right in front of them, and then they saw [the bruises]. Then they already start shouting at me: "Why don't you report it?"" – Saawi

For others, such as for Mary, it took time before the family started to become convinced that it was not working anymore due to the recurring violence, even if they had already tried to mediate. Eventually, they changed their perspective and fully stood behind Mary her decision.

3.4.3. When Support is Difficult or Lacking

The Impact of Migration History on Support

For women who had direct family or, in Saawi's case, in-laws living in the Netherlands, receiving support was easier. In contrast, the interviewed women who arrived as marriage migrants on their own had fewer relatives in the country. This lack of family placed them in a more vulnerable situation, not only because they do not have close relatives, but also due to the intersection with their migration status. Patience, Espoir, Mary, and Sparky all arrived on dependent residence permits for marriage migration. The combination of limited access to support and the potential of being deported to their home countries led to increased fear. For several women, this fear diminished once they had children born in the country, although this was not the case for everyone, including Patience. Consequently, when her brother urged her to come to France, she faced tough choices because leaving the country would jeopardize her chances of obtaining an independent residence permit. Even though her brother made efforts to support her—by calling her, her ex-husband, visiting her in court, and offering her a room at his place—her residence status prevented her from simply going to live with him. This illustrates how, despite having supportive family members, a residence status can serve as a barrier to leaving. Nevertheless, his support reassured her that violence is not acceptable and that it is a valid reason to leave her marriage. It also highlights that even one supportive family member can motivate a survivor to exit a violent relationship. Thus, even if that person is far away, their supportive response still influences women's decisions to leave.

Still, it is important to note that geographical distance resulting from migration history affected women's ability to leave abusive relationships. Moreover, it complicated their access to formal support, like shelters. As a solution, Espoir and Mary explained that their family members in the country of origin reached out to people living closer to them in the Netherlands. Although these people didn't hold discussions about the violence, they played a significant role when the women decided to leave. For instance, Espoir's aunt, living near Amsterdam, played a pivotal role; when Espoir could no longer tolerate her husband's behaviour, she called her aunt, who welcomed her for the weekend. Once Espoir's parents understood the severity of her situation, they encouraged the aunt to visit more frequently. With her aunt's assistance and that of professionals, Espoir ultimately reached out to a shelter for help:

"*I called the GP, and I explained my situation. The GP said, "You should not stay there. if you want to leave, this is the number of Veilig Thuis.*" – Espoir

A similar situation arose for Mary; her parents knew another Pakistani family in the Netherlands and contacted them to see how they could support their daughter. While this was less directly beneficial than Espoir's aunt's involvement, it still made Mary feel more supported in her decision.

Social Workers Mediating the Situation

Some women, however, still leave without receiving support from relatives. Yet, social workers share that often, for women who do not receive support before arriving in the shelter, this outlook can change. As Cloë, a social worker, explains:

"A client comes in and they say, "yes, and I have no contact with my mother or with my parents, because they have this and that". And then a few weeks later they say," yes, I have spoken to my mother and I am going to meet her then and then" and then you just see that things straighten out. So, I think it's mainly a piece of acceptance. Those parents may also still have to process something or a blow from

the break-up at all, or they want to first see how the rest of the family reacts. But the break between the women and their parents is, in the cases I've experienced, a lot of it is temporary." – Cloë, social worker

Furthermore, once women arrive in the long-term shelter, social workers can influence the relationship between the survivor and her family members if the former gives consent. One of the first things that is done when a woman arrives is making a genogram, where they look for important family members.

"What I always do at my first meeting with clients is a genogram. And I do that with everyone. It doesn't matter where you come from, because it's always interesting. [...] And then when I keep hearing about, well, no, my aunt.... Then I think, okay, that aunt has influence. So there... That one is important. I have to remember that one, you know. That one might make the difference." – Sara, social worker

Then, together, they discuss if there is an opportunity to include these family members and if they are not in solidarity yet, if they can work to reach this. This can happen by meeting those relatives, either in person or remotely. These actions were especially important to affect relatives living outside of the Netherlands. As Maryam and Sofia outline in their practice:

"We are also open to talking to parents, and sometimes we do that even remotely, where we call abroad to explain. Very often they, especially parents abroad, have an image about the women's shelter, eh, that it's a whorehouse and... well, not with everyone, but with some. So if you then start that conversation and explain a bit about what it's like here, what kind of assistance, some are then reassured when they know that it's only women who live here. That gives some space. So you do try to look and think with them to see where there is space." – Maryam, social worker

"I recently had a woman of Moroccan background. She had left her husband, and that was a huge scandal. And her parents were shocked by the gossip around it. And then I spoke to the parents to explain to them why she is here, what we are doing. And the parents said the same afterwards, also during the conversation: "It has given us a lot of peace, it's fine like this. We trust our daughter. We don't care about the gossip that goes around. We do find it tough because we are sensitive to that, but we can let it go now." That's how far we have to go sometimes, that we have to have a conversation to explain why.... That's what those parents need, some assurance." – Sofia, social worker

These social workers emphasized that parents frequently held negative perceptions of the country to which their children had migrated, often believing that their daughters had participated in extramarital sex as a consequence of migration. This belief, they argued, was a major source of shame for the family. In response, the social workers would clarify that within the shelter, the women reside only with other women. Although men may be employed at the shelter, there is no physical interaction between them and the residents. When possible, social workers engaged in these discussions by drawing upon their understanding of the women and their families' cultural contexts, acknowledging relevant cultural distinctions that could facilitate productive conversations. For instance, social workers suggested that it was often easier if a social worker with a comparable cultural background and religion as the survivor is the one to instigate such a conversation. This commonality can serve to strengthen a sense of security in the shelter and can convey an important message that in this space, women are safe and not expected to conform to any pre-established gendered expectations. Furthermore, they try to propose a solution that fits everyone. For example, an initial step suggested by social workers might be that the woman does not, at first, formally divorce the partner, but still can live independently. This would mean that the parents did not have to worry about rumours, and the woman can continue her life without a

partner – or at least at a safe distance from her. This incremental approach has limits, of course, as it may bring problems if the woman still wants a divorce later, but it is a starting point that can reestablish the relationship with the relatives and reflects a pragmatic way forward outlined by social workers.

3.5. Discussion

The research revealed, from the perspectives of women and social workers, that family solidarity can be hindered by cultural expectations and therefore may only develop over time. Additional obstacles included beliefs about the importance of two-parent families and economic dependence.

Many women were encouraged to "try harder" to maintain their relationships before family members would consider supporting separation. However, over time, some relatives began to reconsider their views. Although solidarity was not always immediately available, many family members sought a compromise—urging the abusive partner or in-laws to treat the woman better—to prevent a separation. When these attempts failed, some relatives ultimately sided with the woman, even when it contradicted cultural or familial expectations. Not all women received unanimous backing, but most had at least one supportive family member. Moreover, support from others in the Netherlands empowered them to share their experiences and leave their partners. From the perspective of social workers, family solidarity often improved once women moved into shelters. Social workers played a vital role in clarifying misunderstandings to family members, portraying shelters as trustworthy environments. Despite these shifts, family support was frequently insufficient for first-generation migrant women due to structural constraints. Marriage migrants faced heightened vulnerabilities, as their residency permits were often linked to their partners' status, complicating family interventions in legal or residency issues, particularly from abroad.

Many of the findings align with existing literature. As noted by van Hoorn (2015), Tabassum (2016), and Güler et al. (2022), cultural expectations significantly influence both a woman's decision to leave and her family's readiness to support that choice. However, as others have indicated (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2009; Hulley et al., 2023), family solidarity can still manifest, even amid stigma, often preceded by efforts to preserve the relationship. Our findings, therefore, support Latta and Goodman's (2011) suggestion to view it as a process. Moreover, this study supports findings of earlier studies that family attitudes can change (Trotter & Allen, 2009; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Pels et al., 2015) and that even just one person can already play a decisive role (Hulley et al., 2023). Social workers can facilitate this change using methods like genograms (Elaine Congress & González, 2012; Alexander, 2020).

While cultural expectations hold substantial weight, other factors, such as the presence of children (Rhodes et al., 2010), financial dependence (Renzetti, 2009), and close familial ties to in-laws (Campbell, 2024), also influence the level of support. Mary's case exemplifies these complexities: her in-laws reflected patterns shared in earlier studies (Roomani et al., 2016; Somasekhar et al., 2020), and her own family's solidarity was delayed due to strong connections with her husband's family. External issues, such as geographic distance highlighted by Wachter et al. (2021), also limited support. Moreover, marriage migrants experienced specific structural vulnerabilities based on their dependent residence permit, as discussed by de Hart et al. (2022) and in our earlier research (Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). Beyond corroborating previous findings, this research provides practical insights: it underscores the evolving nature of familial support and the role social workers can play in nurturing or restoring it. When solidarity is lacking, social workers actively work to mend relationships between survivors and their families, fostering support networks that may not yet exist.

3.6. Limitations and Further Research

In reflecting on the process of this research, it should be noted that whilst the number of interviewed survivors (n = 9) was limited, the interviews with the women were rich in detail and depth. Still, we have only spoken to women who were able and willing to leave their abusive partners. Consequently, those still living in a violent situation are not represented, and therefore, we are unable to speak for them about the role of family solidarity. Therefore, we encourage researchers to dive deeper into this question of family solidarity by acquiring data from more women in multiple shelters and those still living at home.

3.7. Practical Recommendations

Following the findings, we have two improvements for policy and practice. First, professionals should continue to try to help women contact their families, especially if the latter lives in the country of origin, as this can contribute to the development of support. Consequently, the social workers should receive remuneration and time to persuade family members to be in solidarity. Second, we suggest developing a buddy system for women after they leave the shelter, especially if they do not have a supportive family. Such a system would be particularly beneficial for survivors who are first-generation migrants and who may struggle to interpret and navigate social, legal, and political rights, facilities, and regulations. A buddy can help to find financial support and organizations that encourage social life. This will help survivors to start a new life free from violence.

3.8. Conclusion

Cultural expectations, including the stigma around separation, often cause family members to initially withhold support and attempt to persuade the woman to stay, as leaving could damage the family's honour. It is only after repeated efforts that families may start supporting women in choosing to leave their partners. Sometimes, one relative may have a more significant influence on this decision, especially if they live in the same country. Therefore, interventions before entry and alongside shelter programs should focus on this person's role in encouraging family support.

Chapter 4

Navigating Gender and Cultural Backgrounds in Domestic Violence Social Workers' Assistance

This chapter has been submitted to "Qualitative Social Work".

Abstract

Despite the centrality of identity in social work practice, professional handbooks and codes of ethics provide only limited guidance on its practical integration. Drawing on 37 interviews with social workers in the Netherlands, this study examines how their gender and cultural backgrounds shape client interactions. It highlights how social workers perceive and negotiate their identities within professional contexts. Findings indicate that they often draw on gendered or cultural commonalities, including shared language, to establish rapport and express solidarity with clients. Yet, these same traits can also generate challenges. Cultural similarity may evoke concerns about judgment or breaches of confidentiality, while cultural differences can raise fears of being misunderstood. Such difficulties are frequently reinforced by stereotypes and prejudices. Gender dynamics present further complications, particularly in cases involving survivors' partners, who often request male practitioners, thereby perpetuating gender inequality. To navigate these tensions, social workers adopt strategies including emphasizing confidentiality, demonstrating curiosity about clients' cultural practices, and drawing upon other identity traits. These strategies are effective, except for the embodiment of maleness as a role model for female survivors and children, which remains a challenge. The results underscore the dual role of social identity: it can strengthen connections with clients but also expose social workers to negative stereotypes and doubts about professional credibility. The study argues that social workers should be encouraged to strategically and ethically draw on their identities and experiences. Accordingly, professional handbooks and codes of ethics should incorporate guidance and reflective exercises to support this practice.

Keywords: Social Work Practice, Social Work Education, Domestic Violence, Social Identity

4.1. Introduction

"*A client was trying to figure out how to avoid a certain task. She knows we must tell our colleagues everything, which I did. And the woman thought that because I am Muslim and have the same culture as her, I wouldn't share. And when she found out that I did, she came at me angrily with: "But we are Muslims and you shouldn't share these things*"." —Mina

Mina, a residential social worker of Tunisian descent, works with women who have been exposed to domestic violence in the Netherlands. This quote illustrates how a client's expectations of solidarity, based on perceived cultural and religious commonality, conflicted with Mina's professional responsibilities. It highlights that social workers' social identity traits—such as cultural background, religion, or gender—are not neutral in practice and can significantly shape professional relationships.

Social work handbooks and codes of ethics emphasize the importance of practitioners' reflection on their social identities, underscoring the need to remain aware of the values, norms, and assumptions associated with them (Gehlert & Browne, 2011; BPSW, 2021; Ammann Dula et al., 2024). However, while reflection is strongly encouraged, existing guidelines provide little concrete direction on how social workers should—or should not—draw on their social identities in practice. Only a limited body of research has investigated how practitioners actively disclose or draw on aspects of their social identities in client assistance (Ide et al., 2022; Gilbert, 2024; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2025). For example, a study by Amsterdam UMC and Movisie (Okafor et al., 2024) in Dutch long-term care organizations illustrated how practitioners employ shared language and cultural affinities to foster trust and strengthen relational bonds with clients.

Building on this scholarship, the present article examines how social workers draw on their social identities—particularly gender and cultural background—when engaging with women affected by domestic violence. These dimensions of identity are foregrounded because they are frequently emphasized in discussions on team diversity and inclusion (Thijssen, 2023; Hasselt et al., 2024). At the same time, the cultural heterogeneity of women seeking assistance for domestic violence in the Netherlands has increased markedly in recent years (Jonker et al., 2012; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023).

This evolving context highlights the need to understand how social workers navigate the influence of their own identities in client relationships, and how they address the tensions and challenges that may arise in practice. The study therefore asks: "How do social workers' gender and cultural background influence their practice, and in what ways do they draw on these aspects of their identity in their work with clients?" Clients are primarily female survivors, but their (former) partners and children are also included. In addressing this question, the study aims to provide insights that can inform professional guidelines and ethical codes, ensuring that identity considerations are more consciously reflected upon and integrated into social work practice.

This study is grounded in the concept of social identity, understood as how individuals define themselves and are defined by others through categories such as gender, cultural background, religion, or social class. These categorizations shape both self-perceptions and external perceptions (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity is closely linked to the framework of intersectionality, which highlights how multiple identities intersect to produce complex and dynamic social positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

The findings of this study are based on interviews with 37 female social workers, 21 of whom reported having a (partly) non-Dutch cultural background. The article proceeds by reviewing literature on domestic violence and social work in the Netherlands, as well as educational and empirical scholarship on social identity in social work, before turning to the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

4.2. State of the Art

4.2.1. Social Work and Domestic Violence in the Netherlands

Social work is a broad field that includes support for individuals affected by domestic violence (Keeling & Van Wormer, 2012; van Gelder et al., 2021). Initially, domestic violence services primarily supported Dutch women; however, the demographic profile of survivors has changed over time (Keygnaert et al., 2015). Women with a first-generation migration background often encounter more barriers to support due to limited knowledge of structures, policies, and institutions (Erez, 2002), yet they are increasingly represented in domestic violence shelters (Jonker et al., 2012; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). Contributing factors include limited social networks (Bartels, 2021), community stigma that reduces informal support (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019; Ahmad-Stout et al., 2021), and institutional obstacles such as dependence on residence permits (de Hart et al., 2022; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023).

Despite these challenges, including a higher risk of discrimination, diversity is often encouraged within working teams, especially in social care (Thijssen, 2023; Hasselt et al., 2024). Diverse teams are believed to be more sensitive and responsive to the needs of various communities, as members with different backgrounds are better equipped to understand diverse experiences (Johns & Jordan, 2006; Hasselt et al., 2024). In the Netherlands, however, 73% of social workers are of native Dutch descent, defined as "without a migration background" (Omlo et al., 2023; CBS, 2023). Regional differences exist: in Amsterdam, the number of social workers with and without a migration background is nearly equal, while in the northern province of Friesland, they make up less than 10% (CBS, 2023). Regarding gender, women account for 73% of the national social work workforce, which is also reflected in overnight shelters for survivors of domestic violence (ibid, 2023). In conclusion, these two social identities, often intersecting, are significant in social workers' assistance to clients.

4.2.2. Social Identity and Social Work

Social identity refers to an individual's awareness of belonging to a social group, such as gender, religion, cultural background, and socio-economic class (Stets & Burke, 2000). Stets and Burke (2000) describe it as a process of self-categorization, through which individuals define themselves to others by emphasizing similarities with in-groups and differences from out-groups. Social identity is closely linked to intersectionality, which underscores the overlapping and interconnected nature of identities and their connection to systems of power, oppression, and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Because identity positioning depends on the context, individuals may highlight different aspects of their identity in varying situations, with these positions changing as interactions develop (Cummings, 2018).

Professional and social identities are intertwined, impacting the values and support provided by social workers (Dent, 2017). International social work literature—such as educational handbooks (e.g., Gehlert & Browne, 2011; Sajid et al., 2020; Amman Dula et al., 2024), codes of ethics (AASW, 2020; BPSW, 2021), and empirical studies (Webb, 2017; Ide et al., 2022)—emphasizes the importance of reflection and self-awareness. For instance, the Handbook of Health Social Work emphasizes that social workers should recognize both similarities and differences with clients and reflect on how these influence engagement and effectiveness (Gehlert & Browne, 2011). Likewise, the International Federation of Social Workers has developed a teaching and learning handbook to help students reflect on cases, ethical dilemmas, and their own identities (Ammann Dula et al., 2024).

Reflection is also a key component in the latest Dutch bachelor's degree guidelines for social work (Vereniging Hogeschool, 2023), where it is identified as a core professional skill. However, while reflection is broadly

encouraged, less attention is paid to social workers' self-disclosure of personal experiences or social identities. The Dutch Code of Ethics, for example, does not address this issue at all (BPSW, 2021). Interestingly, this contrasts with some other codes of ethics. For example, the Australian Code of Ethics (AASW, 2020) explicitly addresses self-disclosure, provided it benefits the client and is used cautiously. When in doubt, the guidelines recommend seeking professional advice from colleagues. This difference underscores how national contexts influence the ethical frameworks guiding practice.

Despite limited research, empirical evidence shows that drawing on social identity can significantly influence client–practitioner relationships. In the Netherlands, a study conducted by Amsterdam UMC and Movisie (Okafor et al., 2024) found that clients with a migration background residing in diversity-minded long-care centres often reported greater understanding and connection with practitioners sharing similar cultural backgrounds. Conversely, practitioners without such backgrounds sometimes felt their perspectives were dismissed due to cultural differences. These reactions are often rooted in stereotypes of misunderstanding. The study concluded that many practitioners draw on shared cultural rituals and language as strategies to build rapport and trust. Additional research supports these findings. In New Zealand, Ide et al. (2022) observed that social service workers sometimes disclose relevant life experiences with their clients when it helps enhance cultural competency and empathy. Similarly, Gilbert (2024) demonstrated that women's support workers with lived experiences of violence occasionally shared these experiences to foster hope and connection, even when organizational policies discouraged disclosure. Our earlier work (2025) also showed how social workers in women's shelters engage colleagues with similar cultural backgrounds to improve communication with clients' families abroad. Collectively, these studies highlight both the potential benefits and risks of the influence of social identity and personal experiences in practice.

Building on existing scholarship, this study pursues two primary objectives. First, it seeks to advance research on self-disclosure and the role of social identity in practice, with particular attention to gender and cultural background in the context of domestic violence social work. Second, it investigates whether drawing on these dimensions of identity can generate tangible benefits, while also acknowledging the challenges involved, such as those stated in Okafor et al.'s (2024) study. In doing so, this study aims to provide insights that could inform future professional guidelines and codes of ethics relating to the leverage of social identity in social work.

4.3. Methodology

4.3.1. Research Design

This article is part of a broader study employing a narrative research approach (Creswell et al., 2007). In the broader study, 47 participants were interviewed, including 10 female survivors of domestic violence and 37 social workers, two of whom were full-time team leaders. For this study, the sample consists of interviews with the social workers.

4.3.2. Respondents

The social workers were interviewed between December 2022 and May 2023. 16 social workers were affiliated with the shelter where the first author conducted fieldwork. The remaining social workers were found through email, LinkedIn, and snowball recruitment. It was not a conscious decision to only interview women; however, no men expressed interest in participating. Moreover, as social work is a gendered job (CBS, 2023), it limited the opportunities to interview men. All interviews took place at the shelter with which the social worker was affiliated. Recruitment ceased after reaching data saturation.

All respondents worked with women; however, some also worked with the women's children and (previous) partners. The shelters where the social workers were employed were spread over the country. 26 respondents held degrees in social work, while others had degrees in psychology and pedagogy. Therefore, all respondents held a degree in a social field, and since they work in the area of social work in the Netherlands, they are hired as social workers. The social workers came from a range of cultural backgrounds (see table 1), which they self-identified.

Three (n = 3) social workers were team leaders, with one of them also holding the combined position of residential assistant. The latter works on the provision of shelter activities and support. Fourteen (n = 14) of the participants were full-time residential social workers, frequently collaborating with personal assistants (n = 8). One person had a combined function as personal and residential assistant (n = 1). The primary function of these personal social workers is to accompany women on a legal, social, and psychological basis. Another category was ambulatory assistants (n = 9), of which one person had a combined function as a residential social worker. Their role is to assist women within their own homes. Finally, two (n = 2) social workers specializing in the relationship between children and parent(s) were also interviewed. At the time of the interviews, ages ranged between 22 and 66 years.

Pseudonym	**Self-Identified Cultural Background**
Aisha	Turkish
Alex	Dutch
Anne	Dutch
Catarina	Dutch
Cloë	Cape Verdean–Dutch
Emily	Surinamese
Ela	Turkish
Eveline	Dutch
Flora	Dutch
Juudje	Brazilian–Dutch
Katharina	Dutch
Lena	Dutch
Lianne	Dutch
Lin	Indonesian—Portuguese–Dutch
Lina	Moroccan–Dutch
Louise	Dutch
Marie	Dutch
Maryam	Moroccan–Dutch
Meyra	Dutch
Mina	Tunisian–Dutch
Mona	Surinamese
Nanda	Maluku–Dutch
Naya	Afghan–Slavic
Niya	Moroccan
Nour	Moroccan–Dutch
Nynke	Dutch
Reile	Dutch

Rolinka	Dutch
Rosa	Hindu–Dutch
Sammie	Dutch
Sanne	Asian–Dutch
Sara	Moroccan–Dutch
Schnreue	Kurdish
Sofia	Moroccan
Willeke	Surinamese
Yolanda	Dutch
Yvonne	Indonesian–Surinamese–Dutch

Table 1: Pseudonyms and Self-proclaimed Cultural Background

4.3.3. Data Collection

The data were part of an interview with a broader purpose, divided into three types of questions regarding their perspective on domestic violence policies, interventions focusing on the role of autonomy of the clients they work with, and their positionality in their assistance. For this article, the latter has been utilized.

All interviews were audio-recorded. Before starting, the respondents and the interviewer read the consent form and information letter together. All the social workers provided written consent. Before, during, and after the interview, the respondent could ask questions and request more information. During the interviews, only the respondent and the interviewer were present. All interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Afterwards, all interviews, except for the first one, were sent to a firm for transcription. The interviews were anonymized before reaching the firm, using pseudonyms and cutting out the parts where they accidentally shared their names. Social workers received their transcripts once transcribed and could add, remove, or make changes. Eight of them replied after receiving the transcript, with three providing small changes.

4.3.4. Data Analysis

ATLAS.ti 22 was used to code the interviews. The first author coded the interviews thematically following patterns and recurrence of answers (Parcell & Baker, 2017) with a focus on the topic of social identity. Afterwards, similar topics were categorized and grouped by theme. All quotes have been translated from Dutch to English.

4.4. Results

The results section is organized around two central themes concerning how social workers draw on their gender and cultural background in client support. The first theme examines the intersection of gender and cultural background as reflected in participants' lived experiences. Particular attention is given to the strategies they employ to navigate and mitigate culture-related challenges. The second theme shifts focus to a gender-specific issue consistently raised by participants: the scarcity of male social workers in the field. This section highlights the perceived importance of male social workers, particularly in the field of domestic violence, and discusses how participants attempt to respond to and compensate for this absence.

4.4.1. The Intersection of Gender and Cultural Background

<u>Shared Experiences based on Womanhood</u>

The main group the interviewed social workers work with is female survivors. What the participants have in common with these clients is their womanhood, which all social workers pointed out, such as Nynke:

"*Even though you're from a different country, you're both women. You can relate to each other*."— Nynke

Sharing the same gender was reported to foster trust, as clients recognize commonalities associated with womanhood. Social workers often disclose their own gendered experiences to encourage clients to try actions they might not have considered. For instance, Sammie described frequently urging women to "*claim space for themselves*", illustrating how she does this in her own practice.

Participants also emphasized the influence of cultural background, particularly in its intersection with gender. For some, cultural similarity—especially with clients from North African, Middle Eastern, or Surinamese backgrounds—facilitated rapport and understanding. Others highlighted challenges arising from these cultural similarities, but also differences. The latter is particularly for Dutch social workers assisting clients from these regions.

Having a Comparable Cultural Background

Social workers who share a cultural background with female survivors often reported that common gender-related cultural expectations shape their practice. For example, in many cultures, leaving a partner—even in cases of violence—is considered undesirable. Social workers from these backgrounds recognize such expectations and consciously incorporate this understanding into their assistance. This is particularly evident when they aim to offer solidarity and empower women who choose not to return to their partner, while also navigating concerns about cultural expectations and potential future repercussions. Sara illustrated this with the following example:

"Often, my clients know that I am divorced and have children. When I tell them that I have found a partner again, they see it as an example of hope. I also get that back: "So there is still hope for me. If I get out of this with two children, I can still find a new partner even though I am a Moroccan"." – Sara

This quote shows that Sara brought into the conversation with clients multiple overlapping identity traits—such as gender, nationality, cultural background, relationship status, and motherhood—as a tool to help her clients.

While these shared identity traits can be beneficial, challenges arise as well. As quoted in the introduction, some clients expect that because the social worker has a similar cultural background, they would receive unlimited support, despite professional boundaries. Shnreue is a Kurdish first-generation migrant and shared that women often come to her expecting her to help with everything.

""[They say] you can help me, you have to do things.... You understand me, you understand our culture". [...] In that sense, as a social worker, you have to guard your boundaries for yourself." – Shnreue

These similarities can sometimes blur the professional boundaries between social workers and survivors, as the latter may forget the former's formal role. Conversely, it was also reported that some women from similar cultural backgrounds preferred not to receive assistance from these social workers. Sofia, for instance, recounted experiencing this on multiple occasions:

"That is also sometimes [the case], from a Moroccan family. That they don't want me to assist them because it's too close for them." – Sofia

Women feared that the social worker might have mutual connections in the Netherlands, and that they would share their situation with these people. Furthermore, some women harbored concerns regarding the cultural expectations of social workers from comparable cultural backgrounds towards them:

"Some clients come from a family in which there are strict rules, and they come in with a headscarf and take it off, and they often avoid conversations with me because I also wear a headscarf. They sometimes assume that I am very strict and will judge them. So, from their own opinions and prejudices, they are very reluctant to talk to me in the beginning. Because they think: you wear a headscarf, you are a woman, you probably have the same rules, expectations, and values." – Lina

Clients' reluctance to work with social workers who share a similar cultural or religious background can limit the disclosure of personal information, thereby constraining the assistance that social workers can provide.

Social workers reported being aware of these challenges and employing strategies to address them. For example, when clients feared that the social worker was too closely connected to their community, practitioners emphasized their professional role and the confidentiality of their work. Nour, for instance, described a case in which a woman requested a change of social worker because she, too, was of Moroccan origin:

"*But she had no choice, because there was no one else. So, I had a good conversation with her about it, and I reassured her. [I said], "There's a privacy policy, you know, I can't share information with others, even if I have the same cultural background, that's something you have to trust me with. Everything you discuss with me is private, it's not shared, and it doesn't end up outside with your family or friends*"." – Nour

Nour explained that she wanted to make the client feel more at ease by having this conversation, hoping that this also worked out well.

Having a Different Cultural Background

As noted previously, some women prefer to maintain distance from social workers who share a similar cultural background. This concern was also observed by social workers of Dutch background. For instance, Flora highlighted how cultural differences around issues such as divorce—which carries less stigma in the Netherlands—can lead clients to feel uneasy with a social worker from a comparable cultural background. She acknowledged the importance of recognizing such concerns:

"*They worry that maybe the social worker of a similar background has an opinion about it [them divorcing], believing that she is a bad woman. Whereas a Dutch social worker would not judge at all. Because divorce is, let's say, normal for us."* – Flora

Flora argued that similar background and sensitivities can give more affinity; however, it can also go the other way.

Conversely, some social workers have encountered challenges when substantial differences exist between themselves and the women they assist. Six Dutch practitioners reported that women from non-Dutch cultural backgrounds sometimes felt their experiences and pain were not fully understood, leading them to prefer assistance from someone with a similar upbringing. Interestingly, for Sara, a social worker identifying as Dutch-Moroccan, the opposite dynamic occurred:

"A Dutch lady, we had some conflicts with each other in the beginning. We didn't click right away. She also remarked on my origin. She said, "Well, like if you can help me". And later she told me that she did have negative thoughts about me as a Moroccan Muslim woman with a headscarf as an assistant." – Sara

Another challenge linked to cultural background is language differences. When social workers and clients do not share a common language, understanding and exploring the client's situation in depth can be difficult.

Consequently, practitioners often rely on (digital) translators, although this approach is not always fully effective, as Cloë explained:

"[…] when I communicate via applications or an interpreter, there is still a certain distance. There is either a person or a device in between, so you can read someone's emotions, but it is still more superficial than when you can simply communicate in Dutch. I notice that it also takes longer to get to the heart of the matter." – Cloë

Where possible, social workers attempt to match clients with practitioners who speak the same language, though this is not always feasible.

When clients indicate that cultural differences limit mutual understanding, social workers seek to foster connection and trust by highlighting other shared experiences. Seven social workers in the study have personally experienced domestic violence, often sharing this with the women they assist as a means of establishing common ground:

"I know what it means to be disowned, to be lonely and alone, because I wanted to make the right choice for myself and my children. To this day, I have not been thanked, not forgiven. I have wrestled my way out of it. I try to wrestle my children out too, so that they are not taken advantage of. [They heard:] Your mother doesn't represent anything, nor do you. They felt that, too. Still, I said, 'I'm not going back.' In the beginning, I thought: I'm alone. Who do I have? And later I saw that from different sides people come to me. I am allowed to be there after all. I matter after all. I have now created my own family. And at some point, I don't care anymore. I started standing up for myself and my children. And that's what I've done so far." – Mona

Mona shares her personal experience as an act of solidarity, demonstrating empathy with the client's struggles and leveraging it to encourage women to remain resilient. Social workers also draw on other shared life experiences, such as parenting, to connect with clients. Many survivors face the challenges of single parenthood, particularly when living in shelters where they must care for their children while sharing space with others. Social workers who are parents address this directly, acknowledging the difficulties of motherhood and validating the women's feelings:

"I do think that because I'm a mother, I understand a bit more that you're not perfect and that you deal with your child, while everyone is watching. And how vulnerable that is when you are called on that. I recognize the vulnerability of parenthood." – Eveline

Connection with women is often fostered through what Eveline describes as "shared vulnerability." In addition, social workers seek to build rapport by showing genuine interest in clients' cultures, for example, by learning key words in their language. Some practitioners engage in cultural practices out of personal interest, which they share with clients, as illustrated by Alex:

"I have participated in Ramadan a few times. And I do hear from women, "Gosh, how special that you do that as a Dutch woman." And this helps to connect." – Alex

For social workers like Alex, sharing these kinds of acts leads to respecting the survivor in their culture, aiming to have a relationship based on mutual acceptance, even if there is a professional hierarchy.

What all the social workers agreed on is that they encourage having a multicultural team, as they believe that it can only lead to benefits in sharing and learning from each other. Yet, during the interviews, the social workers indicated that they experience another challenge, namely, the absence of men working in the field of domestic violence.

4.4.2. The Absence of Men

A consensus among the social workers was that it is a regrettable fact that the number of men working in the field of domestic violence is minimal[4]. Meyra explained two consequences she considers negative:

"I have to say that we have a male colleague here, but it does not change much yet. I find that very disadvantageous, because all the men [partners] who are registered with us have to deal with a woman. And I don't think it's good for the women either, because they can also be helped by a man, precisely to give a different context to the image of men, which sometimes really has become distorted by experiences." – Meyra

Additionally, some social workers argued that they have seen in the past that the presence of a male colleague who provided support, care, and attention can positively change the survivors' perception of men. Furthermore, they have observed that male social workers can act as role models for children. By observing men who do not resort to violence, children can develop the understanding that such behavior is not common and accepted, and that positive role models exist, as Maryam indicated:

"*I do think that if there were more male social workers, it could have a positive effect on the re-establishment of contact between child and father, but also just perception of [men]. Often the father or the man is the bogeyman, whereas the presence of male colleagues can change that.*" – Maryam

As noted in Meyra's quote, the relationship with a woman's (former) partner is an important aspect of social work, particularly when partners share custody or consider reconciliation. In these interactions, female social workers were sometimes perceived as unable to understand the partner's perspective or as being biased against them:

"There was also a man who said: they are all women: "I am talking to you, the judge is a woman, the family guardian is a woman". And that he just really needed to talk to a man, so that he could just express himself better, feel better understood." – Lin

This quote highlights how the provision of support can vary according to the social worker's gender. Female practitioners reported being perceived at times as unable to understand certain issues. Simultaneously, they encountered situations in which men were unaccustomed to accepting guidance or authority from a woman. Anne, for example, described a case she learned about through a colleague:

"He [colleague] said that some men make comments like: "Why should a woman tell me what to do?", and that they prefer to talk to a man. Even though we may not agree with this, we need to be aware of it." – Anne

In such cases, female social workers may not be regarded as credible interlocutors, with their professional role undermined by gendered perceptions, potentially reinforcing sexist assumptions about the nature of social assistance. Nevertheless, social workers actively navigate these challenges by employing a variety of strategies. Anne, for example, described an approach she uses when working with men:

"Sometimes I use a male colleague precisely to find an entrance [with the client], and then he can put me forward to gain that trust." — Anne

[4] As explained in the methodology, no men have participated in the interviews; therefore, data is shared from the perspective of the female participants, who have some male colleagues, or have had at least one in the past.

When no male social workers are available in domestic violence cases, practitioners may reach out to other male professionals, such as community workers, to join the conversation. Additionally, social workers employ alternative strategies to establish constructive relationships. For example, Nanda worked with a man of Roma background who felt discriminated against and not taken seriously, largely due to his cultural background. She fostered a connection by drawing on her own experiences with stereotypes as a woman of Maluku background:

"*I said, "It's like no one wants to listen to you, like no one takes you seriously." It was definitely because he was of Roma background, he said. I told him that I do recognize that, because I am Moluccan. With Moluccans, that was also very often [the case]. As if they can only see your outside, and they already don't want to talk to you. But you just want to be heard. Then, I saw that he saw me [as a social worker]. He said: "You understand what I mean". Then we were indeed able to make arrangements*." – Nanda

Thus, Nanda intentionally drew on her cultural background to connect with this client. Another example is given by Schnreue, focusing on language:

"*When I speak to an Arab man, I speak Arabic. And then I do have, at least almost, a connection*." – Schnreue

Clearly, a social worker's social identity plays a vital role in shaping how they support their clients. They recognize its influence on their assistance and employ them when facing challenges. What do these findings suggest for the future of social identities in social work, and how can they be incorporated into educational tools like handbooks and codes of ethics?

4.5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how social workers' gender and cultural backgrounds shape client interactions, focusing on both their perceptions of these identities and how they draw on them in practice. Practitioners often draw on gender or cultural proximity—including shared language—to signal solidarity, build trust, and offer encouragement. However, these traits can also result in ambivalence. Cultural similarity may be perceived as a source of judgment or a confidentiality risk, leading some women from migrant backgrounds to prefer Dutch social workers. Conversely, Dutch practitioners may be seen as unable to fully understand clients' lived experiences. In some cases, these dynamics reverse, as with a Dutch-Moroccan social worker supporting a Dutch client. To navigate these tensions, social workers emphasize confidentiality, demonstrate curiosity about clients' cultural backgrounds, and highlight other shared identity aspects.

Gender dynamics present additional challenges. Male partners of clients occasionally reject female social workers, demanding male colleagues, which can undermine authority and complicate rapport-building. While involving male colleagues can facilitate access, it risks reinforcing gender hierarchies. Participants demonstrated resourcefulness by drawing on other aspects of identity and personal experience, as exemplified by Nanda and Schnreue. Yet one boundary remains unbridgeable: embodying male role models for women and children—a role men are uniquely positioned to fulfil.

These findings demonstrate that social identity has a dual function in practice: fostering trust, connection, and solidarity, while exposing social workers to stereotypes, suspicion, and challenges to credibility (Okafor et al., 2024). Despite its importance, professional handbooks (Gehlert & Browne, 2011; Sajid et al., 2020; Vereniging Hogeschool, 2023; Ammann Dula et al., 2024) and codes of ethics (BPSW, 2021) offer limited guidance on strategically drawing on identity beyond reflexivity. Reflexivity is valuable but insufficient, as it does not address practical dilemmas regarding when, how, and to what extent social workers should disclose or draw on aspects of their social identities.

Our study highlights that social workers can build rapport across significant gender and cultural divides, making this adaptability a key professional strength warranting inclusion in social work education. Still, team diversity remains essential (Thijssen, 2023; Hasselt et al., 2024), particularly the inclusion of male social workers in domestic violence contexts to provide expertise and alternative non-violent male role models. However, diversity alone is insufficient; intentional attention to identity dynamics is necessary to prevent reinforcing stereotypes. We advocate a dual approach: enhancing team diversity while equipping (future) social workers with skills and reflective tools—such as role-play, communities of practice, and structured reflection (Ammann Dula et al., 2024)—to navigate identity ethically and strategically, integrating these competencies explicitly into education and training.

4.6. Limitations and Further Research

This article has limitations that could be explored in more depth in the future. For example, we have focused mainly on two main social positions, and although examples of several others have been acknowledged, future research could study more deeply the influence these positions might have in assisting women. Furthermore, only the perspective of social workers has been used. However, the survivors' views could be interesting and eventually lead to the optimization of assistance. Furthermore, similar research could be carried out with other types of social workers or even a wider range of social professionals, such as healthcare workers.

Chapter 5

Tensions between Autonomy and Safety in Social Workers' Interventions in Dutch Shelters for Female Survivors of Domestic Violence

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Abstract

It is not uncommon that women residing in Dutch shelters following domestic violence consider returning to their partners during the course of their stay. Social workers cannot prohibit return due to the importance of the client's autonomy, as stated in the Code of Ethics. Simultaneously, social workers aim to ensure women's safety and encourage a positive future, which can lead to tensions in their way of support-giving. Based on thirty-five interviews with social workers, this study explores how they navigate these tensions and the support they give in such cases. Building on Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, we distinguish a hands-off and an interventionist approach to autonomy. While the hands-off approach leads to non-intervention and respecting the woman's decision, the interventionist approach focuses on providing tools and encouraging safer alternatives. The findings show that the hands-off approach is the common type of support, leading to feelings of powerlessness for social workers and often prompting endeavours to intervene more actively. Simultaneously, we argue that, whilst the Code of Ethics demonstrates an ambivalence towards these different forms of autonomy, it is often interpreted by social workers as promoting only a hands-off approach. Consequently, we argue that social workers would benefit from a greater recognition of an interventionist approach to autonomy and more liberty in support-giving.

Keywords: Domestic violence towards Women; Social Work; Support; Autonomy; Martha Nussbaum

5.1. Introduction

"You try to talk with a woman and give her insights on safety. Coming [to the shelter] is voluntary of course; it's her own choice. You have women who choose to go back to their partners. And sometimes you also see that then something happens, but at least the social workers advised not to go back. But you can't force someone to stay." — Nour

Nour is a social worker working at a Dutch shelter where she meets women from diverse backgrounds who have fled abusive relationships. The quote shows her response to the question of how she would advise women opting to return to their partner, as this is not uncommon (Griffing et al., 2002; 2005; Edwards et al., 2018; Herman, 2019). Such matters are frequently discussed with social workers. As expressed in the quote, social workers are limited in the scope of the support they can offer. This is because they are bound by a Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021), which provides guiding principles in their professional conduct. For example, the Code states that the client's self-determination is paramount and that the client must be respected in her decision-making process. However, the Code also states that one of the aims of social work is to facilitate and encourage "*sufficient development opportunities and a safe living environment*" (BPSW, 2021, p. 11), and that social workers should seek to "*promote emancipation of individuals, groups and communities*" (ibid, p. 8), and "*support and guide people to achieve their goals and life fulfilment"* (ibid, p. 11). Thus, whilst the Code foregrounds a model of client self-determination that is individual in nature, and that social workers often interpret as requiring —what in this article is referred to as— a hands-off approach, this sits alongside a more interventionist approach that supports individuals in seeking, and sustaining, a safe environment and the achievement of fulfilment in a broad sense. Although self-determination is utilized in the Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021), when exploring the tensions, a perspective of autonomy is adopted, as it encompasses both interventionist and hands-off approaches. For instance, self-determination is not synonymous with guidance and support, thus offering a comparatively limited potential for intervention.

With these ambivalences in mind, we argue that, for many social workers, a potential conflict emerges between these concepts in cases where a woman wants to return to a potentially unsafe relationship. On the one hand, social workers are supposed to support the safety of the women and to assist them to achieve a more fulfilling life, which, as these women have left their violent partners, will include a violence-free life. On the other hand, it is also imperative that social workers respect each woman's decision, even if it leads to going back to an abusive situation. Consequently, tensions can arise regarding the assistance social workers provide: how much can, and should, they intervene in women's decisions? These tensions are exacerbated in contexts where women of a migrant background are navigating decisions to leave, or return to, a violent relationship. For several years, women of first- and second-generation migration backgrounds, often from non-Western cultural backgrounds, have been overrepresented in Dutch shelters (Jonker et al., 2012), due to, among other factors, a less extensive social network in the country leading to a lack of alternative pathways of support (Bartels, 2021). This group of women is often burdened with dependent residence permits (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023) and sometimes cultural expectations that reduce their autonomy, adding further complexity to the tensions faced by social workers. For these women, the consequences of leaving a partner could be losing the right to stay in the Netherlands, and facing shame and rejection from their relatives and social networks in cases of separation (Ahmad et al., 2009; Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019; Hulley et al., 2023).

With this article, we explore the influence these tensions have on social workers' support and focus on autonomy as a guiding framework to examine the decisions taken by social workers. We draw on Nussbaum's perspective on autonomy not only because she has addressed domestic violence as a significant issue, but also because her approach offers a means to address the wider complexities of autonomy in relation to domestic violence. In her theory, the social and economic conditions for autonomy feature prominently, and according to her, intervention is warranted when these conditions impede autonomy (Nussbaum, 2000). In social work, too, these conditions are an important issue. For instance, the Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021) states that social workers have a role to play in improving people's living conditions and addressing constraints on their autonomy (BPSW, 2021, p. 11). The Code also explicitly states: "*A professional thus focuses on the micro level of the individual, the meso level of the immediate social environment and the macro level of the ordering of society"* (p. 5). Simultaneously, Nussbaum encourages respecting women's autonomy and self-determination in decision-making (Nussbaum, 2000), which in the Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021) is also a core value. Due to these connections, we have drawn on Nussbaum's approach to examine the tensions of autonomy in the work of social workers.

Following Nussbaum's approach, we differentiate between two approaches to autonomy: an interventionist and a hands-off approach. While Nussbaum does not employ these terms explicitly, there are compelling reasons for doing so. The rationale underpinning their use is that they accurately reflect a paradigm that fosters a safe environment, while simultaneously demonstrating respect for the autonomy of women in decision-making. An interventionist approach to autonomy aligns with Nussbaum's conceptualization of autonomy as a capacity. This means that interventions are aimed at supporting women in strengthening their capacities, like the ability to realize their life plans, including having a safe and violence-free life. In contrast, a hands-off approach aims to respect women's choices, arguing that autonomy is a matter of free choice and self-determination, regardless of the outcome. Consequently, with these distinctions in mind, this paper asks: How do social workers say they navigate the contradictory approaches to autonomy and support when working with women considering returning to an abusive relationship?

This article is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the recognition of the existence of multiple tensions written in the Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021), guiding social workers. The second presents an analysis of how these tensions can be addressed through support from a hands-off and interventionist perspective on autonomy. Is one of the two paramount for social workers, and if so, how does that influence their support-giving? Both sections commence with an examination of the experiences of social workers with women they work with, regardless of the latter's cultural background and migration history. We then proceed to examine whether additional complexities emerge when considering the intersection of cultural background and migration history.

Thirty-five social workers of diverse positions and locations based in the Netherlands were interviewed for this research. In the next sections, we discuss the current literature on domestic violence, social work, and autonomy, before describing the methodology and examining the results and implications of the research.

5.2. State of the Art

5.2.1. Staying with, Leaving, or Returning to a (Violent) Partner

The Netherlands was among the first European countries to implement a policy on domestic violence in 1984 (Roggeband, 2002; 2012). Nevertheless, non-funded shelters had been in operation since before the formal policy was established, assisting survivors of violence (Roggeband, 2002). Shelters provide temporary, emergency accommodation on a country-wide basis, offering a safe environment for those in need. The permitted duration of stay for survivors varies by city, with a maximum period of nine months (Bargellini, 2021). During their stay in the shelter, women are offered various forms of assistance, similar to other countries (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Gregory et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2020). The objective is to reduce negative emotions such as stress (Jonker et al., 2012) and to empower women to make their own decisions and reclaim their autonomy (Robinson et al., 2020).

Internationally, scholars have considered multiple factors that influence women's decisions to stay in, or to leave, an abusive relationship (Rhodes et al., 2010; Clark, 2016; Heron et al., 2022). For instance, staying can be perceived as safer than (trying) to escape. This is especially the case for women who have experienced intimate terror as a type of domestic violence. Research indicates that intimate terror is characterised by patterns of control and coercion that can lead to violence and femicide. The fear that a partner may leave a perpetrator significantly increases the risk of violence and harm (Corradi et al., 2016; Epstein & Goodman, 2018; Monckton-Smith, 2021). In such contexts, women may decide to stay with their partner as leaving may be life-threatening. Other factors that have been shown to impact decisions to remain in, or leave, an abusive relationship are the presence of children (Rhodes et al., 2010), financial dependency (Jeltsen, 2014, Sep 12), the belief that the abuse was normal (Clark, 2016), and the fear of not being believed when reporting violence (Heron et al., 2022). Additionally, survivors of domestic violence do not always regard professionals as trustworthy, in particular fearing that their children will be taken away if they share their experiences of abuse (Salmon et al., 2015; Heron et al., 2022).

A closer examination of women of diverse cultural backgrounds reveals that they encounter the same obstacles mentioned above, but with a range of additional factors. For example, cultural expectations may co-exist with stigma and the exclusion of the woman and her family members by their community, which could ultimately result in the woman losing (part of) her social network (Ahmad et al., 2009; Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019; Hulley et al., 2023). Furthermore, residence status is a factor that deserves attention, especially for women of first-generation non-European migration background who often arrive on a dependent residence permit (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Elbelassy et al., 2023). For example, women with an insecure residence status, such as refugees and marriage migrants, are subject to a constant fear of removal from the country. For instance, during the first five years, marriage migrants' right to stay depends on the residence permit of their spouse. In cases of separation, the spouse can ask the state to terminate the residence permit, which may result in the marriage migrant being required to return to their country of origin, as they can only ask for an independent residence permit after five years. If domestic violence occurs, it is possible to apply for an independent permit; however, it is difficult to obtain the evidence required to acquire this. As a result, some women tolerate violence due to their fear of losing the right to stay (Voolma, 2018; de Hart et al., 2022; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023).

While there are plenty of reasons why women choose to stay in a relationship, there is also past research exploring what makes women leave an abusive situation (see, for example, Ulrich, 1991; Yamawaki et al., 2012; Heron et al., 2022). Alongside wanting to end the abuse (Ulrich, 1991), another common concern is the protection of children (Heron et al., 2022). In the research of both Yamawaki et al. (2012) and Heron et al. (2022), participants noted that leaving became less difficult when receiving formal (e.g., professionals) and informal (e.g., relatives) support. At the same time, it is not uncommon that women return to their partner after leaving them, often at a period of fraught consideration (Griffing et al., 2002; 2005; Edwards et al., 2018; Herman, 2019). For example, Herman (2019) examined a range of existing literature on returning to an abusive relationship and found that often women go back to their partner due to emotional attachment and love, citing the willingness to forgive their partner. Alongside this, financial dependency, such as the need to support yourself and, if applicable, your children, was also a factor seen to affect decisions to return. Building on such work, Monckton-Smith (2021) argues that a fear of femicide is a further powerful reason driving some women to return to an abusive partner.

These factors are all significant as they affect and may constrain the choices made by a woman. To explore this further, we next consider what autonomy means in such contexts, and focus on both hands-off and interventionist approaches to autonomy.

5.2.2. A Hands-Off and Interventionist Approach to Autonomy

In its classical understanding, individual autonomy means to live a self-directed life. To be able to exercise autonomy, certain conditions must be met. For instance, people need to be free from coercion or manipulation, and their life choices must be respected. This, thus, requires non-interference, even where people make choices that may not appear to be in their best interest. In this sense, autonomy maintains that people have a right to make their own mistakes (Friedman, 2003).

For Nussbaum (2000), this freedom to live according to one's conception of the good requires that other people respect a person's choices in life and not interfere with those choices. She emphasizes that respecting people's decisions is an essential aspect of recognizing their dignity. Therefore, Nussbaum encourages respecting people's decisions, even if they might not fully align with her vision of autonomy. This is because respecting a person's decision is part of recognizing their inherent worth and dignity. Yet, Nussbaum argues that non-interference might not be sufficient to assure women's autonomy in their capacity to lead lives that are of significance to them. She states that "*the central human capabilities, then, are those that allow individuals to lead lives that they have reason to value. Women's equality, on this view, is not just a matter of legal rights, but a matter of actual freedom to pursue these central capabilities, and to make choices about how to use them in ways that are meaningful to the individual*" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78).

Consequently, this demands that the structural inequalities that constrain women's autonomy and capabilities need to be addressed. These inequalities frequently manifest themselves as economic dependence, social subordination, sexual violence, and discriminatory legislation. Nussbaum thus argues that to have autonomy, "*…people must have the ability to make real choices. This requires not only the absence of legal impediments to their freedom but also the presence of the necessary social and economic conditions, including adequate education, healthcare, and opportunities for employment. For women, this means that autonomy cannot be achieved unless these basic capabilities are accessible,*

and the social structures that limit their access to these goods are dismantled" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 82).

In the context of domestic violence, a range of factors ensures that these conditions for autonomy might not be realized. For example, dependent residency permits, a lack of income, or a lack of housing options all constrain the possibility of autonomous decision-making following incidents of domestic violence. In the context of social workers' support, from this perspective, intervening in a woman's situation can be morally justified if this entails addressing the social conditions that impede her autonomy and that help the woman in making choices that reflect her deeper wants and values. For instance, in the case of domestic violence, this would include a violence-free life as a condition for well-being.

We argue that autonomy can require both non-interference in an individual's decision and intervention to capacitate a person to exercise autonomy. First, we name a hands-off approach, and second, an interventionist approach to autonomy. The hands-off approach to autonomy is characterized by the principle that interventions in women's decisions should be discouraged, with the fundamental concern being respect for the woman's decision and self-determination. An interventionist approach demands active intervention in order to realize the conditions for living a life that they have reason to value. As social workers are strongly encouraged to adhere to the Dutch Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021), the following section will examine how autonomy is interpreted within this framework.

5.2.3. The Dutch Code of Ethics and Domestic Violence

The aim of social work is to help individuals and communities reach well-being. To help Dutch professionals achieve this aim, a Code of Ethics was developed based upon a set of core values that are regarded as significant within the field of social work internationally as well as in the Netherlands (BPSW, 2021; IFSW, 2025). The Code of Ethics is for social workers in general and thus not specifically focused on women's shelters and domestic violence. The Dutch Code does not refer explicitly to autonomy as a term, but instead refers to human dignity and self-determination as core values of social work. About the latter, the Code states: "*respecting the self-determination of the individual, address the specific qualities, aspirations, and limitations of the individual and promote emancipation of individuals, groups and communities*" (BPSW, 2021, p. 8). Therefore, the initial aspect of "*respecting the self-determination of individuals*" we have interpreted as the Code's view on autonomy, entailing, according to the Code (BPSW, 2021, p. 8), that social workers should respect their clients' capacity to make decisions, without compromising the process through which these decisions are made, and avoiding paternalism. This could mean, as it is explained, that they should help women to make choices, without forcing their perspective on them. Considering the theoretical foundation of autonomy mentioned in the previous section, we suggest that this represents a hands-off approach to autonomy. However, this does not imply that social workers cannot express disagreement with their clients' decisions. The idea behind this is to stimulate reflection on the part of the client, without putting too much focus on the results or consequences.

However, the Code also offers scope for an interventionist approach to autonomy as it argues that "*sufficient development opportunities and a safe living environment*" (BPSW, 2021, p. 11) should be encouraged, and that the promotion of the emancipation of clients also should be taken into account. Social workers are there to "*support and guide people to achieve their goals and life fulfilment*" (BPSW, 2021, p. 11). Social workers must ensure that the client's interests are clearly identified and that

decisions about their lives are made in line with those interests, while empowering them in achieving such fulfilment. In the context of a violent relationship, this could mean encouraging the individual to first bring an end to the abuse. In these terms, we suggest that there is an ambivalence at the heart of the Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021) as this can be read as promoting both interventionist and hands-off approaches to autonomy.

In this context, it is challenging for social workers to assess what is in their client's interest and how they should be guided in their support-giving. Social workers are trusted with their experience and have a degree of "professional autonomy" (BPSW, 2021), implying "*the freedom and responsibility that professionals have to do justice to people, groups and communities according to their professional judgement. They act within frameworks that determine their scope of action, also called "discretionary space*" (ibid, 2021, p. 28). Yet, social workers are not alone in making decisions regarding their interventions. Not only do they have to follow the Dutch regulations (Roggeband, 2002; 2012), but they are also part of a professional network of various actors working on domestic violence. For instance, the Code of Ethics states that "*Consulting with immediate colleagues, experts and other colleagues helps in applying the abstract standards in everyday work*" (BPSW, 2021, p. 7). Therefore, consideration and reflection about the severity of the situation, often between colleagues, is of importance.

Moreover, regarding domestic violence, there is a reporting code to higher authorities, such as *Veilig Thuis*[5]. The reporting code states that the right to report without consent and cooperation is justified only when it has been established that the violence is structural and that the provision of assistance is no longer effective. Here, again, the word "right" is of importance. Looking at it from a hands-off approach to autonomy, if social workers report without the client's consent, they could be violating their autonomy. In cases involving children and violence, it is imperative to consider the least harmful course of action for the child in question (BPSW, 2021; Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Therefore, social workers do not work alone when it comes to supporting women, as they can ask for advice and guidance from other actors with knowledge and expertise, such as *Veilig Thuis*, and, although we did not disclose information about it in this article, in case of honour with domestic violence, a centre (LEC-EEG[6]) specialized in the phenomenon.

Thus, the Code of Ethics includes multiple guidelines that are open to varied interpretation, with tensions between the implications of these different readings. On the one hand, social workers must respect a client's decision [hands-off approach], while on the other hand, they must strive for a violence-free future for the client, which demands intervention [interventionist approach]. In practice, this tension can be found in the support social workers feel able to offer. We turn to these tensions after a brief discussion of the methodology.

[5] *Veilig Thuis* (Safe at Home) is a country-wide organization with expertise in the areas of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and child abuse. For instance, they aim to direct people in need to shelters, but also to make decisions such as the safety of children in cases where women return to an abusive situation.

[6] Site LEC EGG: Landelijk Expertise Centrum Eer Gerelateerd Geweld|politie.nl (https://www.politie.nl/informatie/landelijk- expertise-centrum-eer-gerelateerd-geweld.html, accessed on 14 March 2025)

5.3. Methodology

5.3.1. The Broader Study

Research Topic

This study forms part of a broader study analysing the influence and intersections between domestic violence, gender, migration, cultural background, and social work from a feminist and institutional perspective. While the existing literature on domestic violence and social work (Keeling & Van Wormer, 2012; Van Gelder et al., 2021) is extensive, little research has explored the intersection of these phenomena. In this context, the broader study seeks to examine potential gaps in support for women within social work and proposes practical solutions to address such gaps.

The wider study is divided into two parts regarding the insights of the women and social workers. One part of the study explores the experiences of women before arriving in the shelter, diving deeper into the factors that made it more, or less, difficult to leave the abusive relationship. Three main factors have been identified: family dynamics, institutional factors, and cultural expectations. The second part delves deeper into the interventions of the social workers towards the women they work with. Next to this research, we examined the role of the social worker's social identity and how this factor influences the assistance they offer to women.

Data Collection Strategies

Two main methods have been used: participant observation and interviews. Highlighted are the voices of, on the one hand, women who experienced domestic violence, and on the other, social workers and team leaders working with the former. In total, 47 participants were incorporated: 10 women and 37 social workers, including leading positions.

Respondents

All 47 respondents identified as women. Of the survivors, 5 of them already had (acquired) Dutch citizenship. The others stayed in the Netherlands on a dependent residence permit of marriage migration, and had the nationality Moroccan (n = 2), Iranian (n = 1), Pakistani (n = 1), and Surinamese (n = 1). All the social workers, including the team leaders, were Dutch citizens.

Data Collection

All interviews were recorded through audio. Before the interview, the respondents received a consent form and an information letter in French, Dutch, or English, depending on the language they preferred. The letters were read together with the first author. Afterward, but also during the interview, the participants could ask questions and request more information. All respondents provided written consent.

Data Analysis

ATLAS.ti 22 was used to code the interviews, using open coding. The first author coded the interviews following patterns and the recurrence of answers. Afterwards, similar topics were divided into categories and themes. All non-English quotes were translated from French and Dutch.

5.3.2. This Study

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative approach to focus on understanding the experiences of the respondents, drawing on a narrative research framing. By making use of this framing, it was aimed to make an in-depth and detailed analysis of the way in which stories are interconnected, as well as the way in which they are socially produced and contextualized (Creswell et al., 2007).

Data Collection Strategies

For this study specifically, interviews were utilized and supplemented with observations from fieldwork in one shelter. Interviews entail the examination and interpretation of respondents' experiences, to comprehend social realities from the perspective of the participant (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). Furthermore, this approach enables the examination of depth and detail. While the vast majority of the data on which this paper is based are drawn from these interviews, several participant observations are also employed to offer critical context. In this paper, we draw on two central observations from this period of fieldwork, notably the prevalence of women returning to their partners after leaving the shelter, and the way social professionals discussed the challenges of assisting women upon leaving the shelter during informal moments.

Sample of Respondents

From the forty-seven interviews, in this article, the ones with the field social workers (n = 35) are used, as they worked directly with the women. Some only worked with women and their children, others with their (previous) partner as well. The shelters where the social workers worked were located in the provinces of Utrecht, Gelderland, North Brabant, South Holland, North Holland, and Friesland. All respondents had a minimum of five months of working experience with women who were exposed to abuse. Twenty-six had degrees in social work. Other degrees were in psychology and pedagogy. Therefore, all respondents had a degree in a social field similar to social work. In the Netherlands, shelters are institutions that fall under the umbrella of social work; therefore, professionals working in and with shelters are considered social workers. Those interviewed came from a range of cultural backgrounds. When asked for their self-chosen cultural background, most respondents identified (partly) as Dutch. Nevertheless, Cape Verdean, Surinamese, Moroccan, Hindu, Kurdish, Turkish, Maluku, Tunisian, Brazilian, Indonesian, and thus a combination with Dutch were also mentioned.

Among the social workers, we identified four functions. Most of the respondents were residential assistants focused on supporting women in the shelter by being present every day, providing activities, and helping with daily life. Secondly, some were personal assistants accompanying women on a legal, social, and psychological basis. Women who arrive in the shelter generally receive a residential and personal social worker to discuss their problems, cases, and other concerns. Thirdly, there were ambulatory assistants who help and support women in their own homes. Lastly, and less commonly interviewed, there were child(ren)–mother relationship specialists working more closely with mothers and their children. These social workers had already worked as personal or residential assistants before. At the time of the interviews, ages ranged between 22 and 65 years. Table 1 shows respondents' characteristics.

Table 1: Respondents' characteristics.

Pseudonym	**Self-Identified Cultural Background**	**Age**	**Role**
Aisha	Turkish	25	Residential
Alex	Dutch	37	Ambulatory
Anne	Dutch	30	Personal
Catarina	Dutch	36	Residential/team leader
Cloë	Cape Verdean-Dutch	25	Residential
Ela	Turkish	50	Residential/admission
Eveline	Dutch	58	Personal
Flora	Dutch	42	Personal
Juudje	Brazilian-Dutch	25	Residential
Katharina	Dutch	64	Residential
Lena	Dutch	50	Residential/personal
Lianne	Dutch	35	Personal
Lin	Indonesian-Portuguese-Dutch	41	Residential/ambulatory
Lina	Moroccan-Dutch	33	Residential
Louise	Dutch	61	Ambulatory
Marie	Dutch	47	Ambulatory
Maryam	Moroccan-Dutch	Exact age unknown	Child(ren)–parent
Meyra	Dutch	48	Ambulatory
Mina	Tunisian-Dutch	24	Residential
Mona	Surinamese	56	Residential
Nanda	Maluku-Dutch	49	Personal
Naya	Afghan-Slavic	31	Personal
Niya	Moroccan	31	Residential
Nour	Moroccan-Dutch	44	Ambulatory

Nynke	Dutch	49	Personal
Reile	Dutch	65	Ambulatory
Rolinka	Dutch	23	Residential
Rosa	Hindu-Dutch	26	Personal
Sammie	Dutch	57	Ambulatory
Sanne	Asian-Dutch	22	Residential
Sara	Moroccan-Dutch	38	Ambulatory
Schnreue	Kurdish	51	Ambulatory/HBV-expert
Sofia	Moroccan	31	Child(ren)–parents
Willeke	Surinamese	60	Personal
Yvonne	Indonesian-Surinamese-Dutch	25	Residential

Data Collection

All the interviews were in Dutch and lasted between forty and ninety minutes. During the interviews, only the respondent and the interviewer were present. Afterwards, all interviews, except for the first one, were sent to a firm to transcribe them. Social workers received their interview once transcribed and could add, remove, or make changes. Information on the data analysis is described in Section 3.1.5.

5.4. Results

5.4.1. The Complexity of Autonomy

Tensions Between Safety and Autonomy

As observed during fieldwork and shared by all the social workers we spoke with, it is not uncommon for women to choose to go back to their partner. In some cases, women leave the shelter overnight without any prior notice. When leaving the shelter earlier than expected, women are required to sign a document indicating their intention to leave. If women think of leaving the shelter, social workers encourage the women to communicate openly if going back is their wish. This is confirmed by Nynke:

"I also say to a woman: you can always go back, but be honest with me; if you say 'I'd like to go back', we'll work on that, we'll see if we can let your relationship continue in a safe way."— Nynke

Social workers generally shared that they do not always oppose the idea of women returning to their partners, depending on the perceived safety of such a move. When social workers assess that the situation is safe enough, and thus that the violence will no longer occur, they do not dissuade a return. Instead, they consider how the relationship could continue safely, as by Aisha:

"I'm not so much concerned with whether they're going to separate or whether they're going to move back together, but it's really about safety for me. If you're going to choose to separate, how can we

make that as safe as possible? And if you're going to choose to go back, how can we make that as safe as possible?" — Aisha

Although safe returns do occur, this is by no means a guaranteed outcome. Critically, as several social workers noted, the existence of a trajectory towards a safer return does not signify that the outcome will be safe:

"There was also custody, supervised visitation, all kinds of things. And in the end, they are back together. If that is really the woman's wish, then you try to prepare and support her in that and hand it over as best you can, as safely as you can, and let it go. It's not for me to say: "no, you really shouldn't do that, or that's not wise". But it is important to make her aware of the possible risks involved; what are you going to do if it happens again?"— Lin

Following on this, as Lin notes, the women's ultimate choice is the one social workers have to respect. This idea is compatible with the hands-off approach to autonomy, where support should be limited as it prioritizes the autonomy of the individual woman in making her choice independently. Nevertheless, Lin does not necessarily endorse the decision as a good one, given the potential for continued risk in the relationship. Consequently, it can be observed that there may be a tension between ensuring the safety and well-being of a woman and respecting her decision, both values shared in the Code of Ethics.

Adding further complexity is the fact that some women also felt pressured by additional constraining factors. Social workers shared that they also work with women who envisaged returning to an abusive situation because of cultural expectations and institutional barriers, such as the coercive nature of residency permits. Social workers noted that these factors were particularly prevalent in affecting the decision-making process of women from first- and second-generation migration backgrounds, where cultural expectations may be present that prioritize staying within a marriage or relationship over other considerations, and where precarious immigration status may serve to constrain the choices women can make.

The Role of Cultural and Institutional Pressure in Going Back to the Partner

Social workers acknowledge that they have worked with women who were faced with cultural expectations that say that they should stay with, or go back to, their partner, even if there was ongoing violence. Social workers recognize cases like this following a familiar pattern: during their relationship, women had good contact with their family. However, leaving the partner might have led to a rejection and rupture. This rupture can be temporary, but sometimes women need to choose between staying separated and losing (part of) their social network, including relatives, or going back to the violent partner and also reconciling with their network. The social workers we interviewed noted that this was a particularly difficult choice. While some social workers were more familiar with such cultural expectations due to growing up with similar expectations themselves, for others, such as Lena, this cultural difference is something they constantly need to keep in mind:

"For us [Western perspective] it's different, but then for this woman it could be a good option to go back because the burden of losing her family as a consequence of a divorce could be worse."— Lena

Moreover, six social workers indicated that, in their experience, women frequently knew that violence was unacceptable. Simultaneously, they also acknowledged that women who are embedded in family structures and subject to stigma frequently aim to prevent disgracing their families. Mona is one

of these social workers who has experienced stigma after leaving her partner herself before becoming a social worker, and who recognizes this phenomenon:

"Of course, you have women who think: 'You know what, maybe I'm being too difficult? What are those few slaps? As long as I'm around my family."— Mona

On occasion, this can result in a woman being compelled by her environment to decide to go back if she wants to keep in touch with her family. In this case, women are caught in a bind of negative consequences either way, risking losing their relatives or risking the continuation of violence and harm. In such cases, social workers share that women who have difficulties with making this choice might especially want to talk with social workers of similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. The similarities can help to compare the situations. For example, Ela noted that:

"I am an immigrant, I am a divorced, single mother, and I manage. They can also take me as an example."— Ela

In addition, women of first-generation migration background coming from non-European countries may also experience institutional barriers regarding residence permits, sometimes in addition to the cultural expectations and lack of family support. It is not uncommon for a woman to arrive in the Netherlands on a dependent residence permit in the hands of her partner, who may then ask to cancel her residence, resulting in her being required to return to her country of origin. Schrneue recounts:

"[women say:] "I have not been here [the Netherlands] for very long, I don't have a child". And chances are very high that the IND[7] will then say: "You won't get a residence permit, you have to go back to your country". That could be the motive for someone to say [I'm going back to the partner], and rightly so. This also has to do with a fear that the family would kill her." —Schrneue

Women arriving on a dependent residence permit, such as marriage migrants, are thus often in a highly vulnerable situation, and one that can be accentuated by cultural expectations. In some cases, being sent back to their country of origin was feared more than experiencing violence, leading women to endure violence in the Netherlands until they had more safety regarding their residence permit.

In Schrneue's quote above, we also see that, for some women, leaving their partner does not mean the end of the violence. For instance, family members might be opposed to the decision to leave and may react to such a decision in a negative way. In addition, some partners may be vengeful and pose ongoing risks to women who have left. For example, in one shelter, Sara referred to the case of a woman murdered by her former partner after she had left him:

"We recently had a new case, where the woman was actually murdered. A woman who lived with us. […] my colleague did everything she could [to help]."— Sara

This example shows that, for some women, staying separated from their partner can lead to dangerous consequences and requires considerable support and security. At the same time, the risk of such violence engenders further fear for the woman, serving to act as an additional reason for them to consider returning to their partner. In these contexts, the risk of violence weighs heavily on both moments of return and possibilities of escape. The most common friction that social workers

[7] IND stands for "*Immigratie—en Naturalisatiedienst*" translated to the Department for Immigration and Naturalization.

experience was therefore between having to respect the woman's choice and worrying about her safety and well-being. Consequently, this prompted the question of how social workers feel about these tensions, and more importantly, how they choose to support women, while keeping in mind their Code of Ethics.

5.4.2. A Hands-Off or Interventionist Support?

Support and Autonomy

Social workers share that, in contexts where children are not present, women's freedom in decision-making takes priority. This means that they should not intervene too strongly, adopting a hands-off approach of autonomy. This often resulted in feelings of powerlessness among social workers. For example, as Anne and Rolinka recount:

"Then we say: "Your life, good luck with it. If you want to get into trouble, then do it anyway." At least that is the language often spoken. Ultimately, I don't decide on someone else's life; it's still voluntary assistance. All I can do is make that person aware of the risks of going back […]. Often that's all you can do, and often we feel extremely powerless."— Anne

"We are voluntary social work. We cannot force someone to stay here."— Rolinka

Although not specifically naming it a feeling of powerlessness, all social workers— without exception— expressed that they cannot make a decision for someone else, especially as the assistance they offer is voluntary, even if they disagree with the decision being made. Making a woman aware of the consequences of her decisions is the best they can do, so they argued. Therefore, even though raising awareness could be seen as an interventionist action, they predominantly adopt a hands-off approach to autonomy.

Nevertheless, all social workers acknowledged that, in dangerous cases, they endeavour to intervene in a more interventionist manner. In line with the tension between hands-off and interventionist autonomy present in the Dutch Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021), social workers also tried to establish an interventionist approach to autonomy; for example, by facilitating an ongoing process of reflection, which is intended to support their clients in making the best decisions. They do this during conversations with women who share that they are considering a return. It might be expressed in a more subtle manner, as stated in the following quote:

"Then I say, "you know, just yesterday we had the conversation about you not wanting it, that you would never go again. So what makes you want to go back now? Did you even talk about it with your partner? I do see risk, because you are here for a reason"."— Nanda

However, some social workers acknowledged that they adopt a more direct approach and share their own perspective on the situation, stress the potential implications of returning, and advise the woman to reconsider her decision:

"And then I said to her, or at least advised her: "You know, don't do anything yet, don't take any steps until you have spoken to your personal assistant, and in the meantime you can think about it, because you are here for a reason. You left him for a reason. And so what is the reason for you now that you want to get back with him? It's, I know you're in love, but you know, that's not everything"."— Mina

Both examples, subtly or directly, display a more interventionist approach to autonomy. In these cases, social workers want the woman to rethink her situation because they know that the consequences

may not promote her well-being. They verbally intervene and suggest paths that might lead to a safer outcome. Still, they feel limited as the maximum they can do is discuss the situation and outcome.

When children are present in the relationship and are in danger, social workers have the right to inform *Veilig Thuis*. If the woman still chooses to go back, this may lead to an intervention from the state and the removal of the children into custody.

"Suppose a woman says, "I'm going back home anyway", and we don't support that for the sake of the children, then we have to report it. We have a duty to report that a woman makes a choice that we find unsafe for the children."— Flora

So, there is a critical difference in support-giving between women with and without children. Whereas for women without children, a hands-off approach to autonomy is often prioritized in the view of the social workers, and the intervention is limited to discussion. When children are present, an interventionist approach is far more likely to be prioritized. At the same time, when cultural expectations influence women's decisions, social workers might intervene in different ways.

The Additional Pressure of Cultural Expectations and Dependency Based on Migration History

When cultural expectations affect a woman's decision-making, social workers, especially personal and ambulatory assistants, due to their closeness with their clients and their social network, often undertake extra activities and interventions to help women, provided the latter consent. Some social workers try to support the maintenance of social networks for women who do not wish to return to their partners, but who fear the risk of deportation and subsequent stigmatization by their social network. For instance, in cases of stigma, social workers try to explain the situation to family members or ask religious leaders (e.g., an imam) to mediate. Maryam and Eveline explain this in the following terms:

"We are also open to talking to parents, and sometimes we do that even from a distance, where we actually call abroad to explain. Very often they, especially parents abroad, have an image about the women's shelter, eh, that it's a whorehouse… and, well, not with everyone, but with some. So if you then start that conversation and explain a bit about what it's like here, what kind of assistance, some are then reassured when they know that it's only women who live here. That gives some space."— Maryam

"I would try to look with the client to see how to approach the parents in the best way. Because those parents are actually very important. And the approach doesn't necessarily have to be us because you also often have mediators. It could also be the imam, or it could be a family member. Are there people who can support her in the process towards the parents?" — Eveline

If possible, they facilitate a social worker from the same cultural background to converse with the family members, driven in part by commonalities of language but also by a shared understanding of cultural nuances. When the problem of deportation and residence permit comes up, social workers—again, specifically personal assistants—encourage and help women to find proof of the abuse that might help them to be able to stay in the country. This support is aimed at ensuring that women have the capabilities to live a life they value, again adopting an interventionist approach to autonomy.

In some instances, social workers also keep in touch with women even after the latter have left the shelter or are no longer in assistance. For example, Sara told us that she sometimes calls a woman, or the woman calls her, to catch up. If the woman uses a certain phrase, Sara knows that it is not going well, and they would try to look for a solution:

"Then we had agreed on a code; when I call her, we would talk about the bags. And I would ask her: "did the children like the bags?" And she would say: "they all liked them", then [I know] she could still pull it off. And if she said: "well, the children didn't like the bags or they weren't very happy with them", then I knew, okay, things are really not going well and I have to call the police."— Sara

This approach is not expected from Sara as a social worker, and might also be unauthorized due to the ideal of client–social worker distance being maintained, a factor that often depends on whether the case is fully closed or not.

We thus see that social workers experience multiple tensions when working with women exposed to domestic violence, particularly in contexts where women may wish to go back to an unsafe situation. Concerns over their safety are the most significant of these, combined with feelings of powerlessness due to the boundaries social workers experience in seeking to support women who have survived domestic violence. This tension also affects their pathways to intervention, whether that be in a hands-off or an interventionist way. Still, a hands-off approach to autonomy is mostly encouraged in support, leading us to consider whether there might be a fuller role for a more interventionist approach and a more interventionist interpretation of the Code of Ethics.

5.5. Discussion

5.5.1. Should More Interventionist Support Be Considered?

The primary objective of this article has been to examine the manner in which social workers intervene when women consider returning to their partners in situations where safety is still a concern. In order to examine these interventions in more detail, we have used the concept of autonomy, based on Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach (2000), which we defined as primarily an interventionist approach to autonomy, and contrasted this with a hands-off approach to autonomy. While the hands-off approach limits intervention in women's decisions, the interventionist approach encourages the provision of tools and conditions to ensure that women make decisions that support their life goals. This led us to ask which approach is more promoted in social work, where interventions are based on guidelines outlined in the Dutch Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021).

In discussing the Code of Ethics, we argue that a tension arises in social workers' approach to intervention due to the presence of ambiguities within the guidelines when it comes to interpreting and enacting autonomy (BPSW, 2021). Within social work, clients' autonomy is an imperative value, which is necessarily accentuated in the Code as "*respecting the self-determination of the individual*" (BPSW, 2021, p. 8) and is interpreted as a hands-off approach to autonomy. Yet, the Code also encourages having a safe living environment and the promotion of the emancipation of individuals. Thus, the Code recommends both a hands-off and an interventionist approach to autonomy (BPSW, 2021). Still, we found that, amongst all social workers, an understanding of autonomy as a hands-off approach is more common: they believe they should not be intervening and that this hesitancy to intervene is a means to respect women's autonomy. Common belief from social workers is that the most they can do is to explain to women the dangers of the situation and suggest that return—in general—is not recommended.

This restriction prompted feelings of powerlessness, and some social workers endeavoured to intervene more actively. When women consider returning because of cultural or institutional pressure, such as marriage migrants, social workers feel that they can intervene more actively as long as the

woman consents to the action. Consequently, social workers will do their best to support the woman to prove the violence so that she can receive an independent residence permit (de Hart et al., 2022; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). When a woman opts to unwillingly return due to the influence of her family members, personal and ambulatory assistants might propose to the woman to engage in discussions with the relatives to clarify the circumstances and ease the relatives' concerns. In adopting this approach, social workers do more than is strictly expected from them, demonstrating cultural sensitivity and utilizing the ambiguity of the Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021) to support a more interventionist approach. Sometimes, against the rules of conduct, social workers choose to maintain contact with women even after they have left the shelter, as is shown through Sara's example. Likewise, this intervention only occurs when a woman consents. These extra steps illustrate that social workers are highly dedicated and motivated to provide assistance, but feel constrained by the limitations they believe are imposed by legislation that prioritizes the principle of clients' autonomy.

Thus, in the field of social work, autonomy is normally understood as a right to make your own decisions, a principle that social workers are expected to uphold. However, a secondary interpretation of autonomy is present within the regulatory framework, namely as a strategy for enhancing clients' autonomy. This approach, though not explicitly delineated in the text, is occasionally implemented by social workers, which they do sometimes apply but without fully feeling entitled (BPSW, 2021).

These findings suggest that the balance between hands-off and interventionist intervention in cases of domestic violence needs careful consideration and may need to be reassessed. The current, partly contradictory, Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021) has been interpreted as imposing limits on the ability of social workers to take more interventionist measures. This creates serious safety risks, as the hands-off approach may result in women going back to dangerous, abusive situations, potentially leading to further violence and, in extreme cases, femicide (Monckton-Smith, 2021). Therefore, following Nussbaum (2000), we suggest that a priority should be the creation of safe conditions in which women can make a choice. However, it is important that any such intervention is not paternalistic in nature, and this needs to be the situation between an overly interventionist and hands-off approach. For instance, a way of seeing a possible interventionist approach in practice is that women should have access to all the necessary information to be able to make a choice in staying in the shelter or separated, returning to their partner, or even other options (e.g., returning to the country of origin). Therefore, social workers must be aware of all the potential alternatives they could offer women. Next to this, if this is something that women wish, social workers should encourage reflection by offering tools to balance their options. In instances where women do not have proficiency in the Dutch language, for example, recently arrived marriage migrants, this can be through illustrations. For example, Heron et al. (2022) advocate a similar approach in their work examining the reasons for women to leave their partners. Such an approach, we argue, can also be an effective tool in this context. This would lead to them having multiple paths available, each with its risks and benefits. Regardless of the decision they take, it allows the women more agency. While this would require more work for the social workers, it could help the women in making autonomous choices.

If women decide to stay a little longer separated from their partner, or in the shelter, psychotherapy should be available. In case they would still like to return to their partner but first would need some more distance, (gradually) more regular contact in a safe environment can be offered. We do not want to argue that women should never return to their partner; the main criterion for any return should be that violence has ceased and does not recur. The challenges for social workers that we have explored

here often centre on this removal of violence and the risk of violence as the starting point for rebuilding relationships and sustaining support. Therefore, our approach builds on the perspective of many of the social workers discussed here (for example, Aisha's narrative), that women should not necessarily stay separated from their partner after experiences of abuse in all cases. Instead, while this is already encouraged, we continue advocating for offering support in ending the violence and reestablishing a healthy relationship for those who wish to return to their partner, and have focused on the varied ways in which social workers navigate these tensions. If such an approach is encouraged, that also means that shelters need additional budgets to provide psychotherapy.

Next to this, it also requires the willing participation of the partner in safe and mediated contact meetings. Parts of the interventionist approach we propose are already endorsed by the city of Rotterdam (Lokale Wet- en Regelgeving, 2024), which is focused on the perpetrator of the violence and assists him in becoming and remaining non-violent. Recognizing the dangers of paternalism, this should be under the provisions that these interventions respect the consent of the women, and that they have engaged in reflective exchanges with colleagues about cases where they consider intervening more.

Moreover, regardless of the decision women make, support is needed in all cases: whether a woman decides to return to her partner or maintain a separation from him. Emotional, legal, and financial guidance should be offered in all cases. While this option poses a set of practical challenges, it is based on the principle that support should not be conditional on the woman's decision. A potential approach includes maintaining contact with specialized social workers after a woman returns, without the need for ongoing ambulatory guidance, in order to maintain support and ensure this remains accessible. As illustrated in Sara's case, some social workers already keep in touch with women after they have returned to their partner, albeit informally. Taking this approach and formalizing this contact with specialized support could reduce the workload for social workers in shelters and contribute to enhancing the safety of the woman. For instance, these social workers could be calling the woman once a month, depending on the situation and the woman's wish to remain in contact.

Lastly, in case of institutional barriers such as the fear of deportation (Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023), we encourage easier access to an independent residence permit for survivors of domestic violence. Thus, it is essential to continue refining and implementing these strategies to create safer, more supportive environments for women experiencing domestic violence.

5.5.2. Limitations and Further Research

This research has some important limitations. For instance, one limitation of this study is the lack of clarity regarding the influence of culture, nationality, and ethnicity of the social workers on their interventions, and how these self-chosen identities differ, intersect, and interrelate with each other. Although this study acknowledges the importance of respecting the social workers' self-identified backgrounds, it did not sufficiently explore how their identities shaped their approach to autonomy in practice. Future research could delve deeper into this aspect to provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity and intervention in social work.

Next to this, our focus on the perspective of social workers has necessarily omitted the views of women who went back to their partners or who were seriously considering doing so. Whilst this paper offers no specific insight into the reasons they choose to return to their partner, our focus here has been on the role and decisions of social workers in response to these choices. Similarly, our focus on social workers has omitted the views of family members and the partners themselves. Yet, a fully holistic

account of the decision-making process for women who have left violent relationships is beyond the scope of this paper alone and would encompass a broad range of social actors and structural factors, as evidenced in past research (Morrison et al., 2021; Roegiers Mayeux et al., 2023). Instead, we have sought to examine the challenges and dilemmas experienced by social workers as a group at the heart of responding to, and seeking to inform, in often subtle ways, the decision-making of women who have survived domestic violence.

To build on these insights further, interviews with mediators could be conducted to gain insight into their experiences and methods of facilitating reconciliation. Moreover, it would be valuable to examine the elements that could facilitate a survivor's decision-making process while still preserving the possibility of reconciliation with their partner. This could facilitate a breakthrough in enabling them to make autonomous choices within a safe environment. Finally, once the Rotterdam program for survivors and perpetrators (Lokale Wet- en Regelgeving, 2024) has been operational for several years, it would be valuable to more fully consider its effects on couples who wish to reconcile.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

In this thesis, I looked at the influence of gendered cultural expectations on institutional, family, and social workers' solidarity, and considered how these factors impacted women of migration backgrounds' decision-making regarding leaving, staying in, or returning to a violent relationship. In this conclusion, I return to the central research question of this thesis, which was: **"How do gendered cultural expectations influence institutional, family, and social workers' solidarity towards women of migration backgrounds who experienced domestic violence?".**

Chapter One introduced the topic by discussing the prevalence of domestic violence against women and clarifying the definition used in this thesis. It provided background on research related to gendered cultural expectations and explained the varied types of solidarity drawn on through this research, embedding these in a broader context of Dutch policy towards domestic violence and migration, family support, and the role of social workers. Chapter Two addressed inconsistencies in institutional solidarity for women experiencing domestic violence in the Netherlands, especially those with dependent residence permits due to marriage migration. It argued that support systems should be improved to protect all women, regardless of background or migration status. Chapter Three explored the process of family support for women wanting to escape abuse, showing that families' attitudes can shift from unwillingness to help to solidarity, as ongoing violence and calls for help continue. It highlighted the importance of social workers in rebuilding family ties and stressed the need for early interventions to help survivors transition safely, while maintaining good contact with relatives.

Chapter Four examined how social workers' gender and cultural identities impact their assistance, and how social workers employ these social identities with clients. It is recommended that social work handbooks and codes of ethics underscore how social workers could use their social identities by offering tools and training on this topic. Another recommendation was to involve male social workers to provide role modelling for survivors and children. Chapter Five discussed one of the key dilemmas faced by social workers: balancing respect for the client's autonomy with more active intervention, and ensuring the safety of women when they consider returning to unsafe relationships. The chapter advocated for the broader acceptance of interventionist strategies within ethical boundaries and called for the development of better tools to empower social workers in supporting survivors.

6.2. Discussion and Conclusion

Through this thesis, I showed that cultural expectations are influential on multiple solidarities, which are impactful in women's decision-making to stay, leave, or return to violent relationships. More specifically, their decision-making is shaped by a dynamic interplay between gendered cultural expectations, migration status, and the availability or lack of supportive structures. These factors did not operate in isolation. Rather, they intersected and amplified each other. How cultural expectations and (the lack of) solidarity have played a role will first be elaborated separately, before connecting these two themes.

Firstly, gendered cultural expectations emerged across the chapters as a central factor shaping women's decision-making. In Chapter Two, these expectations explained women's hesitation to leave a violent situation due to fears of stigma from family and community. Chapter Three showed how these expectations shaped relatives' responses, influencing whether they would act in solidarity with survivors. Relatives' willingness to support survivors often depended on fears of stigma and shame; for example, several participants described relatives withdrawing contact after a woman left her partner.

Chapter Four illustrated, through a social identity lens, how the expectations tied to social workers' gender and cultural backgrounds shaped the way they assisted their clients. Finally, Chapter Five explored the intersection of cultural expectations with autonomy. Social workers shared that some women in their care have considered returning to violent partners due to still believing that they should meet cultural expectations, a belief that places them under pressure to stay with an abusive partner.

Survivors described these expectations as unwritten rules tied to separation and personal and family honour, upheld through fear of shame or scandal, a description that aligns with prior research (Ahmad et al., 2009; Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019; Heron et al., 2022; Hulley et al., 2023). For instance, Aboulhassan and Brumley (2019) showed that second-generation Arab American women felt responsible for maintaining family honour, a theme that was also echoed in my interviews with women identifying as half-Dutch and/or having been raised in two different cultural worlds in the Netherlands. Similarly, a Pakistani participant reflected experiences consistent with Tabassum's (2016) research on women's lives in Pakistan. While this thesis avoided the culturalization of violence, as critiqued in Dutch scholarship (Roggeband, 2012; Römkens, 2017; Mellaard & van Meijl, 2021), it did confirm how cultural expectations influenced women's decision-making in multiple ways.

The role of family members' reactions and acts of solidarity was a second theme recurring in multiple chapters. Family members themselves often had to overcome challenges, for instance, fear of stigma or of broken relations, to be in full solidarity with the survivor. Prior studies recognized the importance of family (Prosman et al., 2014; Pels et al., 2015; Hulley et al., 2023), yet they rarely examined the decision-making process of family responses. My findings revealed that these responses were seldom straightforward but were grounded in a range of factors. While family solidarity can be influenced by cultural expectations, practical factors such as ties to in-laws (Campbell, 2024), geographical distance (Wachter et al., 2021), and financial barriers (Renzetti, 2009) also cannot be ignored and can even be more important in decision-making processes. Notably, a lack of family solidarity could reinforce other constraining factors, such as dependency on migration status. Women with a first-generation migration background often could not return to their country of origin, yet policy regulations still left them at risk of being sent back.

Consequently, institutional solidarity is identified as a third theme. Regarding all women, a shortage of housing and shelter places frequently hindered them from leaving abusive partners, echoing Bargellini's (2021) research highlighting how a lack of safe spaces limits women's options in the Netherlands. Survivors often had to wait for shelter places, illustrating a lack of institutional solidarity. Women with dependent residence permits particularly faced severe institutional obstacles. Consistent with previous studies (Sterckx et al., 2014; Bartels, 2021; de Hart et al., 2022), partners often manipulated migration status to coerce women into remaining in abusive relationships. Separation from a partner can result in deportation to the country of origin, where divorced women can face stigma and shame. Through the enforcement of such migration regulations, the Netherlands reveals a lack of cultural sensitivity, expecting the cultural contexts of these women's lives to be similar to those of native Dutch women, and thus neglecting the long-term consequences for these women's futures. Although legal alternatives exist for remaining in the country independently, survivors' limited knowledge of residence regulations and the challenges of obtaining an autonomous permit place women with a migration background in a particularly vulnerable position.

Besides this, in the second chapter, the participants shared that front-line policy practitioners, such as teachers, nurses, and general practitioners, who recognized violence when women were still with their

partner, also played a vital role. Their involvement impacted women's options, often encouraging them to leave. However, this sometimes led to new dilemmas for the women when children were involved, leading them to perceive their situation as a "lose-lose" choice between staying with their partner or risking separation from their children through institutional intervention. A similar situation can be observed with survivors considering returning to their partners. Social workers explained how some women considered going back to reunite with family members who disapproved of the separation because of cultural expectations. However, when children are involved and the situation is still dangerous, returning can put women at risk of losing custody of their children. This underscores a critical tension: while prioritizing children's safety is essential, institutional responses by front-line and social workers could be perceived as lacking cultural sensitivity, overlooking the fact that women may lose vital family connections due to cultural expectations.

Although not the central focus of state policies and their implementation, the fifth chapter highlighted how regulations within social work can also create a lack of institutional solidarity. The Social Work Code of Ethics (BPSW, 2021) places boundaries on practitioners' interventions, preventing them from advising survivors directly on what they believe women should do. However, the way social workers respond to women considering a return to a violent relationship can strongly influence decision-making and, in some cases, even save lives. Professionals face the challenge of balancing respect for client autonomy and the impact of cultural expectations with the responsibility to discourage potentially harmful choices. This tension reflects both institutional constraints and the expression of social workers' solidarity, with the two deeply intertwined and at times in fraught tension.

Social workers' solidarity is thus also a central theme regarding how social workers individually interact and assist their clients. When cultural expectations and a lack of family solidarity pressure women to return to their partners, social workers strive to find solutions that prevent women from being forced into such difficult choices. This requires additional effort, such as involving family members or mediators. Moreover, social workers often draw on their own social identities—particularly their cultural background—to encourage relatives to be in solidarity with the survivor. More broadly, workers' social identities, especially (the intersections of) their gender and cultural background, shaped perceptions of violence and perspectives for the future (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016). While not without challenges that social workers knew how to overcome, making use of their social identity and experiences has led to positive results in building rapport and showing solidarity. Social workers saw the latter as a way to encourage survivors to stay strong and show that they understand their struggles. This aligns with Ide et al. (2022) and Gilbert's (2024) findings in Chapter Four on the importance of disclosure and recognition of support workers' own experiences with domestic violence with survivors.

Concluding and revisiting the research question, it is first of all evident that gendered cultural expectations shaped women's perceptions and available options. These expectations influenced solidarities arising from external structures and relationships—such as family, policies, front-line professionals, and, once women enter shelters, social workers, too. However, this research also showed that while cultural expectations do constrain women's agency, they are not the only, nor necessarily the primary, factor influencing women's decision-making process to stay with, leave, or return to a partner. Different forms and expressions of solidarity can simultaneously constrain or facilitate women's choices, even when not influenced by expectations. Chapter Three on family solidarity showed that while relatives may wish to offer support, institutional factors—such as assisting a survivor

in obtaining a residence permit—are very often beyond their ability to help, not least because families rarely knew how Dutch regulations operated, or were comfortable engaging with these.

Lastly, many attempts to act in solidarity do not truly result in solidarity. Offering the possibility of an alternative residence permit on humanitarian grounds to people on a dependent permit who have experienced violence, as shown in Chapter Two, is a helpful measure. However, if this option is not communicated to the person in need, it becomes ineffective, as they may never know about it. This underscores the need for structural changes when such factors fail to operate in solidarity with women. Consequently, section 6.4. will address recommendations.

Overall, the study provides empirical evidence of how intersecting systems of culture, migration, institutions, and identities structure survivors' agency in the context of domestic violence. This research underscores the need for culturally informed, holistic, and supportive interventions that address these intersecting influences to better assist women facing violence.

6.3. Limitations

There are multiple limitations in this thesis that I would like to highlight. First of all, methodologically, only ten survivors have been interviewed, which constitutes a small sample. This has various reasons, which have already been indicated in the introduction and subsequent chapters. Moreover, for the women who did share their struggles, it was not always easy for them to articulate painful situations. While narrative interviews and vignettes aimed to allow them to speak as much as they wanted, it would have been interesting to explore other methods, such as drawing or other visual approaches. For example, collage-making to encourage women to share their experiences while also providing a therapeutic way to process associated negative feelings (Bird, 2018) could have been utilized. However, as a researcher, I did not feel comfortable enough to employ these alternative methods.

Regarding the social workers, although many shelters and regions have been represented, it was impossible to cover all. Consequently, other regions may have specific experiences that were not captured. In this research, only 37 social workers were interviewed, and it would be beneficial to interview a broader range of individuals in the future, including male social workers. Additionally, social workers frequently mentioned the importance of including their colleagues working in men's shelters. They may have similar experiences to the women, albeit from a different gendered perspective.

While two specific target groups have already been highlighted, other perspectives could also be explored. For example, people who have perpetrated violence and family members have not been interviewed. Even though these are more difficult to reach, they could provide additional and holistic insights into family dynamics and the decision to stay in or leave a violent relationship. Additionally, despite the current research intentionally interviewing only female survivors due to the specific intersections of domestic violence with gender, future research could include male survivors who have received or are still receiving assistance. A similar consideration applies to queer couples.

Lastly, while the focus was on intersections of gender, cultural background, and migration status at the meso- [family solidarity] and macro-level [institutional solidarity], the thesis omits many other interactions that are rarely addressed, such as socio-economic status, class, the educational background of the survivor, social worker, or family members. This oversight excludes experiences that might influence women's decision-making to leave, or consider returning to a partner after leaving the shelter. It may also affect the assistance provided by social workers.

6.4. Practical Recommendations

Leaving an abusive relationship and navigating the aftermath is undeniably complex. Women face numerous factors that shape their decision-making. Thus, it is vital that women receive improved support before, during, and after their stay at the shelter. Firstly, increasing funding for shelters for women and other survivors of domestic violence is critical. Following Bargellini's research (2021), but also my findings in Chapter Two, there is insufficient shelter space, forcing women to wait or seek temporary alternatives. This recommendation concerns everyone, but especially women who cannot find a housing alternative for a range of reasons, including a lack of family support. Moreover, women of first-generation migration background, of whom some were without family support or had no social network in the Netherlands, often struggled with language proficiency initially and were unaware of Dutch policies towards domestic violence, migration, and their rights. Due to the change in migration policies, newcomers are still obliged to pass the civic integration exam within three years, but it is not mandatory to follow an integration trajectory to do so (de Hart et al., 2022). Consequently, the exclusion of first-generation migrants in daily life by partners is unintentionally facilitated.

I argue that these women deserve to know from the moment they arrive in the country what they can do and where they can go in cases of domestic violence. Therefore, I recommend that the integration trajectory becomes mandatory and free for all newcomers. This will help facilitate connections with others who may share their experiences and inform them about options to escape violence. Furthermore, I recommend hanging visible and accessible information in public spaces in the five most spoken languages in the Netherlands, so that survivors of domestic violence know where to find help. This information should not include a lot of text, but should be clear in its purpose. A visual example of a person looking afraid can be shared, along with emergency information and numbers, such as from *Veilig Thuis.* For women who experience isolation, seeing this information in places where they go (e.g., supermarket, general practitioner) could inform them about professional help. Although it is impossible to force someone to leave a violent situation, it is crucial to ensure they are aware of alternative escape routes.

Family support plays a pivotal role in women's decision-making when leaving abusive relationships, but is sometimes limited due to cultural expectations that separation is undesirable. As discussed in Chapter Three, social workers sometimes involve mediators who hold influential positions and have broad community connections to talk with family members. These individuals can be instrumental in promoting understanding within families, even if they live abroad. Therefore, it is essential to train high-profile community figures, such as religious leaders or other respected mediators, to stand behind the unacceptability of violence. Consequently, these people can encourage family members to be in solidarity with survivors of violence. By engaging with parents or relatives, they can explain the harmful effects of domestic violence and, when possible, collaborate on finding solutions. Rather than forcing women to choose between two harmful situations (returning to the abuser or losing their family), these influential figures can help to find a solution that avoids this choice. If a resolution is not possible, they can also guide survivors to appropriate support services.

Once women enter shelters or seek assistance, social workers must have access to multiple comprehensive resources that enable them to provide effective support. These tools should foster a safe and comforting environment where women can process their experiences and begin healing from the trauma of separation and abuse. Importantly, the resources must be culturally sensitive and available in multiple languages to accommodate women who do not yet speak Dutch fluently. When

language barriers persist, creative, non-verbal tools (e.g., illustrations, drawings) should be utilized to ensure communication remains effective. These resources should also clearly outline the survivor's options and help her envision potential paths for her future.

Following the arguments made in Chapter Five, I add my voice by recommending that the field of social work would benefit from greater diversity among social workers. A diverse team not only provides role models to survivors but also increases the likelihood of language accessibility and cultural understanding, and exchange between colleagues. Social workers should be able to receive free language courses of common languages (e.g., French, English, Arabic, Turkish) during their working hours to foster trust and improve communication with the clients. This diversity enriches professional practice and improves the quality of support offered. Additionally, social workers should be informed that, and trained on how, they can incorporate their own diverse identity traits in their work with clients. Therefore, this should be indicated in educational handbooks and codes of ethics. While currently reflection and self-awareness are promoted in educational handbooks, it is important to make social workers aware that their perspectives are always mediated by their positionality and to address potential unconscious bias. What I advocate is something different, namely, to reflect on when and how you can use your identity traits in a beneficial way in your professional interventions.

For women who choose to stay in shelters longer or require extended time apart from their partner, psychotherapy should be available. For those who wish to eventually reconcile, safe and gradual opportunities for contact should be arranged. This already happens in multiple shelters, where social workers act as neutral mediators for both parties. Additionally, this may include involving partners in interventions aimed at breaking patterns of violence. The city of Rotterdam (Lokale Wet- en Regelgeving, 2024) already started a pilot program focused on the person who perpetrated violence to assist them in becoming and remaining non-violent. If the program succeeds, funding and action should be available in the whole country.

Crucially, women must receive emotional, legal, and financial assistance regardless of whether they choose to return to their partner or maintain separation. One possible way is to ensure continued access to specialized social workers even after a woman returns to her partner, without requiring ongoing intensive guidance, to maintain a safety net and ensure help remains accessible. When women decide to start over alone, a volunteering buddy system can be proposed. This buddy system should be facilitated by the state and locally encouraged. Of course, the person who becomes a buddy should not have a history of violence. The rationale behind this idea is that someone with knowledge of national policies, regulations, and the Dutch language can help women, especially those without family support and little knowledge of the country, in navigating their new life after the shelter.

6.5. Future Research

Domestic violence remains significantly under-researched, leaving many areas in need of further urgent and critical examination. The existing literature has mainly focused on understanding why women choose to leave or stay with abusive partners. However, the post-shelter phase in survivors' lives deserves more attention, particularly regarding their efforts at acquiring stable housing, mental health management, and rebuilding social networks—areas where many survivors receive little support. Furthermore, research predominantly centres on female survivors. However, it is essential to acknowledge that men can also be survivors, yet they are often ignored in both academic and policy discussions. Future studies should include male survivors and examine how their experiences might

differ, especially concerning societal stigma and access to support services. Similarly, investigating domestic violence in LGBTQ+ communities in general, and looking at the intersection with, for instance, migration, is vital for a more inclusive understanding of the issue. Additionally, research often lacks diversity regarding participants' immigration status. While many women studied in the context of domestic violence and dependent residence permits are marriage migrants, other groups, such as refugees or asylum-seekers, also deserve study. Different immigration statuses can impose various pressures on women’s decision-making and help-seeking capabilities. Future research should investigate how different residence permits influence survivors’ choices and access to resources, aiming to identify effective and tailored support mechanisms.

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Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift is het resultaat van een vierjarig onderzoek naar de ervaringen van tien vrouwelijke overlevenden van huiselijk geweld met een migratieachtergrond en zevenendertig sociaal werkers die met deze doelgroep werken. Eerder onderzoek naar huiselijk geweld richtte zich vooral op afzonderlijke factoren die bepalen of vrouwen in een gewelddadige relatie blijven of deze verlaten. Zo spelen gendergerelateerde culturele verwachtingen een grote rol. Dit toont dan ook aan dat de impact van culturele verwachtingen en -achtergrond moeten worden meegenomen bij onderzoek naar besluitvormingsprocessen van vrouwen. Er is echter een tekort aan diepgaande analyses van het complexe samenspel van factoren, waarin gender en culturele verwachtingen en achtergrond – inclusief migratiegeschiedenis – centraal staan, specifiek binnen sociaal werk.

Dit, terwijl gender, culturele achtergrond en migratieachtergrond binnen sociaal werk doorgaans beschouwd worden als cruciale identiteitskenmerken voor het begrijpen van risicodynamieken, de betrokkenheid van professionals en het vormgeven van passende interventies. In Nederland is dit vraagstuk vooral belangrijk voor vrouwen die als eerste generatie migranten naar het land zijn gekomen en die door hun verblijfsstatus in een extra kwetsbare positie verkeren. Migratiegerelateerde omstandigheden, zoals een onzekere verblijfsstatus, taalbarrières, afhankelijkheid van een partner, en beperkte sociale netwerken, vergroten hun kwetsbaarheid en belemmeren hun toegang tot hulpverlening.

Bijgevolg onderzoekt deze studie welke invloed gendergerelateerde culturele verwachtingen hebben op de solidariteit van instituties, familie, en sociaal werkers, wat ook weer een impact heeft op de besluitvorming van vrouwen om een gewelddadige relatie te verlaten, te blijven of terug aan te gaan. De centrale onderzoeksvraag luidt: “Welke invloed hebben gendergerelateerde culturele verwachtingen op de solidariteit van instituties, familie en sociaal werkers ten aanzien van vrouwen met een migratieachtergrond die te maken hebben gehad met huiselijk geweld?”

Hoofdstuk 1 introduceert het onderwerp door de prevalentie van huiselijk geweld tegen vrouwen en de gehanteerde definitie uiteen te zetten. Verder wordt ingegaan op gendergerelateerde culturele verwachtingen, de ontwikkeling van het Nederlands beleid, de rol van familie en sociaal werkers, en het belang van intersectionaliteit. Daarnaast worden de analytische perspectieven verduidelijkt, waarbij solidariteit wordt uiteengelegd in drie dimensies: institutionele solidariteit (beleid en uitvoering), familiale solidariteit en de solidariteit van sociaal werkers. Ook de methodologie en de opbouw van het proefschrift worden toegelicht.

Hoofdstuk 2 richt zich op de rol van het Nederlandse beleid en de uitvoering daarvan, met specifieke aandacht voor de wisselwerking tussen huiselijk geweld- en migratiebeleid. Ik laat zien dat beleid vaak discriminerende effecten heeft op vrouwen, in het bijzonder op degenen die via huwelijksmigratie een afhankelijke verblijfsvergunning hebben. Tekortkomingen, zoals het ontbreken van verplichte, maar kosteloze inburgeringstrajecten en de te hoge eisen aan de bewijsvoering om op basis van geweld een zelfstandige verblijfsstatus te verkrijgen, dragen bij aan hun kwetsbare situatie. Dit leidt tot de conclusie dat de beleidssteun structureel verbeterd moeten worden om bescherming voor alle vrouwen, ongeacht achtergrond of status, te waarborgen.

Hoofdstuk 3 analyseert de rol van familie in de besluitvorming om een partner te verlaten. Hoewel culturele en sociale verwachtingen echtscheiding vaak ontmoedigen, blijkt familiale steun cruciaal voor het ontsnappen uit een gewelddadige situatie. Steun kan bovendien verschuiven van afwijzing naar solidariteit naarmate geweld voortduurt en hulpvragen toenemen. Daarnaast benadruk ik ook de

belangrijke rol van sociaal werkers bij het bevorderen van steunende familiebanden en wijst op de noodzaak van vroegtijdige interventies die zowel veiligheid als familiecontact kunnen waarborgen.

Hoofdstuk 4 onderzoekt hoe de sociale identiteiten van sociaal werkers hun hulpverlening beïnvloeden, en hoe zij deze bewust inzetten. Opvallend is dat er over dat bewust inzetten weinig wordt vermeld in educatieve handboeken, beroepscodes, en onderzoek. Zowel voordelen als uitdagingen van gender en culturele achtergrond komen aan bod. Overeenkomsten in achtergrond tussen hulpverlener en cliënt creëren vaak herkenning en vertrouwen, maar kunnen ook spanningen genereren. Toch vinden sociaal werkers strategieën om die spanningen te hanteren en effectieve werkrelaties op te bouwen, door hun sociale identiteitskenmerken bewust en reflexief in te zetten.

Hoofdstuk 5 onderzoekt het ethische dilemma waarmee sociaal werkers te maken krijgen wanneer vrouwen overwegen terug te keren naar hun partner. Daarbij staat het spanningsveld centraal tussen respect voor autonomie en zorg voor veiligheid. Twee benaderingen springen eruit: de veelgebruikte *hands-off* strategie en de minder toegepaste interventionistische aanpak. Ik betoog dat sociaal werkers meer handelingsruimte moeten krijgen om vrouwen te stimuleren hun veiligheid voorop te stellen en hen daarbij actief te ondersteunen.

Hoofdstuk 6 concludeert dat gendergerelateerde culturele verwachtingen weliswaar een belangrijke rol spelen op andere factoren, opties en percepties, maar niet de enige – en niet altijd de doorslaggevende – factor zijn in de keuzes van vrouwen. De dynamiek van solidariteit vanuit beleid, familie en sociaal werkers kan keuzes zowel beperken als verruimen, ook waar culturele verwachtingen minder aan te pas komen. Tegelijkertijd blijkt dat niet alle intenties tot solidariteit daadwerkelijk tot solidariteit leiden. Het onderzoek toont hoe intersecties van cultuur, migratie, institutionele structuren en professionele identiteiten het handelingsvermogen van slachtoffers van huiselijk geweld mede vormgeven. Het proefschrift sluit af met een samenvatting van de belangrijkste bevindingen en hun implicaties voor beleid, praktijk en toekomstig onderzoek.

Curriculum Vitae

Chloé Roegiers Mayeux (1997) was born in Belgium to French parents. She grew up with a strong awareness of social justice issues, particularly gender equality and anti-racism. In 2015, she earned a bachelor's degree in Social Pedagogy from VIVES Kortrijk, gaining hands-on experience in youth work, refugee support, and sexuality and sexual health. She later completed a pre-master's in Social and Cultural Anthropology at KU Leuven, followed by a master's in Gender and Diversity at Ghent University (2021). During her master's studies, Chloé interned at GAMS, focusing on female genital cutting, and wrote her thesis on abortion legislation in Belgium. Alongside her academic path, she remained active in social work through volunteer and student roles with young people and refugees.

After graduating, she began a Ph.D. at the University of Humanistic Studies in the Department of Citizenship and Humanization of the Public as part of the European project SOLiDi, contributing to workshops and academic events. She conducted 18 months of fieldwork in a women's shelter and later completed a four-month research internship at Pharos, focusing on female genital cutting and healthcare. Beyond her research, Chloé has a strong interest in event organization and language learning, which she actively pursued throughout her doctoral studies.