

The views of forced migrant survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Sweden

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SEREDA: Sexual & Gender Based Violence against **Refugees** from **Displacement to Arrival**

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Abstract

This working paper sets out evidence from interviews with forced migrant survivors of SGBV in Sweden. The interview material is contextualised with a brief account of services for the prevention of and protection against SGBV that are generally available in Sweden and the specific ways that refugees access those services. The methods through which 17 women and 13 men were contacted and interviewed are described, along with brief demographic characteristics to illustrate their diversity in terms of legal and marital status, sexuality and country of origin. The sexual and gender based violence that these 30 forced migrants report took place across the refugee journey, from country of origin to country of refuge. The violence was experienced both physically and psychologically and forced migrants' vulnerability was compounded, when women were reliant on their husband for migration status, and when financial control was exerted. Gendered expectations reinforced suffering and hindered recovery from the harms of violence for men and women. The long waiting time for migration status decisions were a significant barrier to recovery and to integration. The lack of access to information was a notable barrier for women's recovery and integration with wider society, especially in the context of fear of losing custody of one's children to the state, which reinforced isolation. Forced migrants were generous in sharing their own insights and information to support others' efforts towards recovery and integration.

Key Words

Sexual and gender-based violence; forced migration; MENA region; integration; structural violence; (inter)personal violence; gendered harms

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Introduction

Sexual and gender based violence – SGBV – has long been a feature of refugee experience, particularly effecting women, girls and LGBTI+ people. The complexities of conceptualising SGBV in forced migration are significant (Ozcurumez *et al.* 2020) with the politics of how to address injustices highly contested (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). This working paper is part of the wider SEREDA project that creates new knowledge on forced migrants, asylum seekers’ and refugees’, as well as former asylum seekers’ and refugees’, own understandings of the SGBV that they have experienced and witnessed over the journey from a home country, through transit to a country of refuge. An earlier working paper in this series¹ addressed the views of those providing services to refugees and former refugees subject to SGBV in Sweden. This paper draws on interviews with 30 asylum seekers and former asylum seekers, living in Sweden about their experience of SGBV.

The paper starts with a brief introduction to the services that are available for those who have experienced SGBV; as well as the services available to prevent the occurrence and address effects of gendered violence. In the Swedish context, few of these services are specifically aimed at refugees, but are rather part of the general welfare service and so we also review the limited evidence available describing how refugees and asylum seekers can access these services. The methods used to make contact with and conduct interviews with (former) asylum seekers are set out, before the bulk of the report is given over to describing the main themes that were covered in the interviews.

SGBV prevention and protection services in Sweden

Since the 1990s, men’s violence against women has been on the political agenda in Scandinavia, and with increased attention, it has come to be seen as a matter of public, rather than private concern (Lindström 2005). One outcome of this increased attention has been the emergence of the so-called Nordic paradox which considers the links between gender equality and intimate partner violence. Sweden, like its Nordic neighbours, is consistently highly rated in international comparisons of gender equality, and yet nonetheless has high lifetime prevalence rates for the experience of intimate partner violence (Wemrell *et al.* 2020). While the reasons behind this paradox are multiple, its existence has kept a focus on men’s violence against women in society at large, in the public consciousness and on the political agenda.

The prevention of sexual violence and harassment, with a particular focus on men’s violence against women, has been a priority for Swedish statutory services since the announcement of a

¹ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2021/service-providers'-perspective-in-sweden.pdf>

national strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women in November 2016.² A number of measures and strategies have been pursued to prevent domestic violence and for protection against its effects across society. These include stronger protection and support, more effective law enforcement, work environment investments and awareness-building measures. A ten year strategy was adopted in 2017, aimed at preventing men's violence against women, defined as 'including honour-related violence and oppression, as well as prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes³'. The approach to prevention of and protection against SGBV involves multiple stakeholders, as it aims to reform legislation, work environments, the availability of housing, policing and legal resources at municipal level, statistical monitoring, and awareness through new educational requirements. A significant focus has been on reforming work environments by making employers responsible for enforcing the outlawing of persistent sexual harassment. The national strategy emphasises the need for all stakeholders to be involved, including the police, the judiciary, teachers, healthcare and social workers.

Government agencies, regional authorities and non-government organisations make up networks against violence that include a national network against honour-related violence⁴ and the National Centre for knowledge on men's violence against women⁵. The Public Employment Service, the Social Insurance Agency, the Migration Agency and the National Board of Health and Welfare have been commissioned to devise a joint plan for improved detection of victims of domestic violence and honour-related violence, while NGOs are often present at particular local settings such as community centres and shelters.

The national strategy includes an explicit ambition to involve men in preventing violence against women which informs ongoing work across government ministries, with the establishment of a gender equality unit⁶ to oversee the adoption of and compliance with national legislation and local policy.

Refugees and asylum seekers

In general terms, the needs of vulnerable asylum seekers are guaranteed by the 1994 Law on the Reception of Asylum Seekers. Although the legal act does not define the vulnerability of those seeking protection, the Swedish Migration Agency describes standards for the reception of vulnerable asylum seekers, mainly focussed on 'children, women, disabled persons, and elderly, persons with mental disorders or serious illnesses, and persons vulnerable to harassment or exploitation due to sexual orientation or gender identity' (Shakra and Szalanska 2020: 63).

² https://www.government.se/4ac3ba/contentassets/4bbb1643e427432682464d4559c41027/fact-sheet_national-strategy-to-prevent-and-combat.pdf

³ <https://www.government.se/articles/2018/01/the-government-of-swedens-measures-against-sexual-violence-and-harassment/>

⁴ <https://www.natverketmothedersrelateratvald.se/en/>

⁵ <https://nck.uu.se/en/>

⁶ <https://www.government.se/government-policy/gender-equality/>

As part of the joined up nature of the national strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women, the Migration Agency (Migrationsverket) conducted a survey of case workers which confirmed that new arrivals to Sweden often have very little knowledge of Swedish legislation and their rights in Sweden (EMN 2019: 1). The Migration Agency does not have a standard protocol for identifying refugees who have been subject to SGBV on arrival in Sweden, beyond self-identification at the asylum interview.

Information about violence, including links to appropriate service providers, is offered in written form on the Migration Agency website⁷ and orally more than once during the asylum interview, as a means of supporting refugees' self-identification. Although subject to significant delay, once it happens, the asylum interview includes routine questions about the refugee's experience of violence (EMN 2019: 33).

The process through which the Migration Agency identifies vulnerable refugees has been found to fail, with vulnerability not always noted in assigning refugees to accommodation during the asylum procedure (Shakra and Szalanska 2020: 69). Nonetheless, the Migration Agency usually provides special accommodation for those identified as vulnerable, that is 'women, unaccompanied minors, LGBTI persons, torture victims, elderly people, disabled people and those with physical and mental disorders or those endangered by harassment due to their gender identity or sexual orientation and victims of human trafficking' (Barthoma *et al.* 2020: 26). The protection of vulnerable groups is more appropriately framed as the protection of vulnerable individual asylum seekers, since no special rights are collectively granted to any group and migration decisions are made on a case by case basis. Systematic efforts made by the Migration Agency to identify victims of human trafficking among asylum seekers and refugees and to provide them with safe housing have been successful, according to interview-based research (Barthoma *et al.* 2020: 26). At refugee accommodation centres, NGOs are often represented on a voluntary basis to supplement municipal service providers but access to legal support is very limited (EMN 2019: 33).

In addition to a national strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women, the Swedish government launched an explicitly Feminist Foreign Policy in October 2014, aiming to 'contribute to gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls' (Government Offices of Sweden n.d.). The foreign policy sought to promote women's human rights, to live in freedom from violence and to access sexual and reproductive health services. While these ideals have informed policy around foreign aid, at home changes made to migration governance from 2016 have had the effect of accentuating refugee vulnerabilities and enhancing the gendered harms. In 2016⁸, temporary legislation on asylum rules made it impossible for

⁷ <https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/Private-individuals/British-citizens/Help-for-those-who-are-living-with-domestic-violence.html>

⁸ "Among other measures, the Swedish Parliament passed a temporary law in 2016, introducing temporary residence permits for beneficiaries of international protection (instead of permanent ones) and restricting the right to family reunification."

https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/27a_sweden_apr2016_part2_final_en.pdf

persons who have received asylum in Sweden to reunite with their families, leaving family members stranded in conflict areas, in refugee camps and faced with the prospect of making journeys at the hands of smugglers, where the risk of trafficking is significant. The 2017 action plan for a feminist foreign policy⁹, included the aspiration of “strengthening the human rights for women and girls who are refugees and migrants” as a priority. The legislation restricting family reunion for asylum seekers actively obstructs that priority (CONCORD 2017: 5).

Sweden’s sense of itself as a moral state, setting an example to the wider world (Borevi 2012; Schierup et al. 2006) informs the initiatives to prevent men’s violence against women. The end of the era of Swedish exceptionalism as a country without right wing xenophobic elected politicians is part of the the story of how harsh migration governance has blocked feminist ideals in anti violence work (Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019; Schierup and Ålund 2011). The tensions between ideal and practicalities across gendered and racialized questions of refugee protection are what we hope to tease out in our future analyses.

Methodology

The first phase of the SEREDA project involved interviews with providers of services for refugees, asylum seekers and former asylum seekers who had experienced SGBV. The focus of the project was on forced migrants from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region since this was a key forced migration stream at the inception of the project.

We were granted ethnics permission (Dnr 2019-05370) by the National Ethical Review Board (Etikprövningsmyndigheten) to undertake semi-structured interviews with people who were or had been forced migrants and who identified themselves as having been subject to SGBV. The questions to be addressed in the interviews were agreed across the international consortium, to provide comparable interview material.

The significant sensitivities of recruiting forced migrants to speak about their experience of gender-based violence meant that multiple strategies were called for. We started by inquiring of the service providers (where appropriate) that we interviewed whether they could put us in touch with their clients. While some service providers refused to speak with their clients, others identified individuals who were felt to be in a position to discuss their experiences without accruing harm. In addition to service providers who we had interviewed, we contacted other organisations, associations and groups including religious groups, commercial and voluntary organisations who had particular contact with forced migrants, to make contact with potential interviewees. We were able to make contact in Arabic, Swedish, English or Turkish and while this work was time consuming, our efforts mean that we recruited a diverse group of refugees and former refugees. The interviews were undertaken between June and August of 2019.

⁹ <https://www.government.se/4ab455/contentassets/654bcc72d8f44da087386b4906043521/swedens-feminist-foreign-policy--examples-from-three-years-of-implementation.pdf>

Demographic data for the study participants (N=30)

Variable	Number of participants
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	17
Male	13
<i>Age</i>	
20-30s	21
40-50s	9
<i>Sexuality</i>	
Heterosexual	28
LGBTQ	2
<i>Children</i>	
Yes	17 (15 in country of refuge)
No	13
<i>Marital status</i>	
Married	9
Widowed	2
Divorced	6
Single	13
<i>Living condition</i>	
Living alone	7
Living with someone	23
<i>Educational level</i>	
Primary	6
Secondary	8
Tertiary	16
<i>Country of birth</i>	
Afghanistan	6
Guinea	1
Iran	1
Iraq	3
Jordan	1
Syria	12
Turkey	6
<i>Immigration status</i>	
Asylum seeker (waiting)	6
Asylum seeker (rejected)	3
Refugee - permit of stay	21

(Table courtesy of Anna Pérez Aronsson and Hoayda Darkal)

In this paper, we first discuss different manifestations of SGBV that our interviewees noted across the different phases of their journey from displacement to resettlement. The second part analyses various barriers to recovery from the effects of SGBV and its effects on integration. This part offers a multifaceted reading of challenges that survivors of SGBV face in their resettlement

process. The third part discusses the interplay between resilience and integration as a continuation of the various dimensions of integration that are described. Finally we offer a short summary and some concluding significant remarks on the prospect for future analyses.

Manifestations of SGBV

SGBV survivors are subject to a variety of types of violence, coming from a range of sources, and playing out across the different phases of forced migration. During interviews participants shared various SGBV experiences. We undertook an initial analysis, presented here, to identify how forced migrants said that the negative outcomes of SGBV could be alleviated and further incidences prevented, while supporting the resilience of individuals. We also evaluated how integration in Sweden was said to be facilitated. Our first finding is that the multifaceted nature of the challenges that refugee survivors of SGBV face originates, not only from the type of violence experienced, but also the phase or phases of the forced migration journey when it occurred. Our second finding is that the lack of accessible information regarding Swedish legal and regulatory frameworks for SGBV survivors' multiplies forced migrants' vulnerabilities and insecurities and creates a structural barrier to their integration. Third, where opportunities for integration present themselves, survivors of SGBV are keen to move away from sources of violence, even if these have been endured over a long period of time.

In the remainder of this report, we set out the physical and psychological forms of violence that were described, as well as the barriers to recovery from the effects of violence that (former) refugees themselves identified. We go on to explore the inter-weaving of processes of integration and resilience in refugees' accounts, to identify the conditions and interventions that supported refugees' own resilience and integration, according to their own priorities.

Forms of violence

The most prevalent form of violence experienced in forced migration settings is physical, and survivors of SGBV in Sweden shared their experience, described in vivid terms.

"In Syria, there was some problems and he would hit me, but I was forced to be silent about them because, first of all, my mother did not allow divorce, she wouldn't allow any daughter to get divorced. Second of all, if I got divorced, where I go? There was no house to stay in. When my parents passed away, the house was divided amongst us and it was sold and we each got our shares. I didn't have anywhere to go, so I was forced to do as he pleases because I had no other place to go" (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

"[Talking about the place where they were detained during the journey] We were sitting next to each other, wearing black and it's hot and we can feel the sun hitting. My son would go to different women and call, 'Mama, mama.' And I would have to remind him that I'm there every once in a while and call him by my voice. One time he cried a lot so I had to remove the Khimar from my face just a little bit to show him that I am here and I got caught by someone who punished me. I hope God doesn't forgive him for what he did to me, I pray

that he actually has died. He had a stick with him that day and hit me with it—he was calling me dumb, the Tunisian man, and saying I will end up in Hell. I started crying and begging him to stop. I told him I did this for my son. Then he took me somewhere else, I don't know where but it was set up for those who violate their rules and the beating and punishment became extreme.” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

“It was hard. I do not remember those days. I do not want to go back to those days. It was not a nice journey. Especially the journey from Iran to Turkey, Turkey to Greece, and Greece to Italy. Those were very bad days. (...)We were eight people, eight young men traveling together. They tortured us and then finally sent us back to Turkey.” (Married, Man, Afghanistan)

Physical violence was not only experienced in their home country and on the journey to seek asylum, but also during their daily lives in Sweden. Physical violence included but was not limited to the intimate partner violence experienced by women. On the other hand men have experienced violence on the streets of Sweden.

“He hit me that day again and I left the house, and went to the police and told them everything. I didn't have a phone with me, I didn't have a bus pass nor my card. I was only dressed at 10.30 PM and went out. I walked near the cars because I took some hits to my head so I was scared of falling and there was a snow storm so I was worried of not being seen so I walked by the cars' lights.” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

“For instance, once I was beaten by some men in the streets. They started to argue with me and made fun of my Swedish. They also shouted that I am not a real man as I left my country behind. It was awful.” (Single, Man, Iraq)

This quotation clearly demonstrates how prejudice against refugees/asylum seekers is closely related to an understanding of masculinity that normalizes being 'tough' and 'aggressive', which is also implicated in justification for and explanations of intimate partner violence in refugee/asylum seeker households. The interplay between the cultural setting of the home country and the more recently encountered Swedish cultural setting underlines how refugee men's masculinities have been shaped and shape the experience of forced migration becomes a crucial factor underlying intimate partner violence.

“Men became much more controlling over their women and wanting to keep their wife's relationship with them as if they were still in Syria. So, problems in families increased.” (Married, Woman, Syria)

The loss of the traditional role of breadwinner in the new settlement was described as increasing a tendency for men to emphasise a 'masculine' power, felt to be deeply embedded in their cultural roots. This type of culturally-justified masculine violence often plays out in parallel with reference to limitations put on people with refugee status, both legal and financial. The following quote described how once a man was granted asylum, he imposed restrictions on his wife.

“After being granted asylum, he started limiting my freedoms. He would not allow me to even carry money. He changed my card number, so I do not know it. He transferred all the money which I supposed to be receiving, so that he deals with the money. He would give me 10 euros and tell me “This will be enough, and you do not need more!” I was not able to buy things as simple as a hand cream.” (Widow, Woman, Syria)

Forced migrant men were often aware that they should avoid physical violence against their spouse, since it could have a negative impact of their case for asylum. Asserting financial control over a wife was an alternative to physical violence and effective in limiting her freedom to integrate. We were told that once permanent residency was granted, then physical violence could escalate - as a perpetrator of violence felt confident in his legal right to remain, a cycle of violence could be established to prevent his spouse accessing protection and integration policies. Intimate partner violence was noted when a Swedish national with a migrant/refugee background brings his wife to Sweden on a spousal visa.

“[He] hit me and told me, ‘I don’t love you, if I had met you once or twice, I would not have married you. Look at yourself, look at your body.’ Even though he was 16 years older than me, he would tell me that he would not want me and talk about my physical appearance and body and say that he was forcibly stuck with me. He hit me for hours, until 4AM. He would hit me and say, ‘I want to rape you, I want to have sexual relations with you but from the back and you cannot say no, and if you say no you’ll get hit more.’ I was like an animal, I couldn’t say no. I told him, ‘It hurts a lot and I cannot do it, it is harmful,’ and he said that he doesn’t care.” (Divorced, Woman, Iraq)

Fear of deportation, social exclusion and lack of skills navigating Swedish society critically accentuated the vulnerability of SGBV survivors. These fears escalate when the survivors remember their traumatic experiences from their journey.

“Experiencing all of these from the very beginning of my journey killed me. I am broken. I cannot sleep. It is very hard. I cannot balance life.” (Single, Man, Iraq)

“When I think of what we went through, and the sea journey and the war, I can never forget it. You know for the first two years since I arrived to Sweden, I would see dreams of house-raids. I can never forget how they raided houses and took people away. (...) It’s like a trauma which I feel in my heart, it’s very hard.” (Married, Woman, Syria)

Another compounding factor for the survivors of SGBV was their dependence on their spouses who are also their perpetrators.

“I didn’t know what would happen to me and what my situation would be [if I left him], because they always made us scared of (the social services).” (Divorced, Woman, Iraq)

When survivors were culturally isolated, they felt afraid of losing their only social connection with people from similar cultural backgrounds.

“In our society, a divorced woman is a very lowly regarded thing, and the woman tries as much as possible to keep her house, it is not easy to have a woman that would get up and leave, especially if it is to an unknown.” (Divorced, Woman, Iraq)

Finally, a lack of life skills and economic interdependence creates a strong fear factor for SGBV survivors against taking any action towards protection or prevention.

“If I get divorced, I do not know how to speak the language here. I do not know what happens to me. He gets the groceries and drives the car around. I do not know how to take care of myself.” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

Survivors who do try to establish new lives by acquiring economic independence could face forms of violence including economic, psychological and sexual from new sources.

“My boss always said to me he is helping to me, although I was paid even less than what I deserved, also he tried to touch me, sexually harassed me a couple of times, he said to me I look like European rather than Turkish, although as women we tell ourselves that these were not harassment out of optimism, or think that they happened accidentally, I was sexually and emotionally harassed by my boss.” (Single, Woman, Turkey)

Critically, a lack of employment opportunities pushes survivors into low paid, low skilled work, which in turn increases their vulnerability and hinders their integration process.

“They [family members and friends back in Iran] think it is a beautiful life over here, but in fact it is not. In terms of labour, if you are working in a labour-intensive lower-class work, the attitude you are exposed to, the quality of life, mindset is exactly same as Iran. The system in Europe is designed in a way that will not integrate you in any way and remind you who you really are.” (Single, Woman, Iran)

We return to the issue of integration in due course, but here we note the impact of physical violence that survivors have experienced in their home country and during the journey is also an important barrier for survivors ability to integrate in Sweden. Health issues resulting from the physical violence experienced prevents refugees taking up employment and economic opportunities, as well as hindering much needed social interaction with the local community to develop language skills as well as avoid feeling isolated.

“I have to get a medical report since I do not believe my health would allow me to work here. My knees lockdown even walking on the road. When I was subjected to violence, they [police officers that have resorted to violence in Turkey] did not get me treated.” (Married, Woman, Turkey)

All in all, the forms of physical violence that survivors of SGBV have experienced in their home country, during the journey and in Sweden, often inter-twined with financial and psychological controlling behaviours, have an immense impact on the psychological well-being of the survivors as well as deepening their insecurities and vulnerabilities.

The intertwining of different forms of violence was illustrated by survivors reporting instances of emotional or psychological violence, which could both result from and lead to physical violence in a tightly bound cycle. The psychological ill effects sometimes result from the impact of physical violence experienced in the country of origin and during the journey, damaging wellbeing in Sweden. For others, psychological violence is embedded in their daily normalcy in Sweden that they have brought along through their migration journey. As the quotation below demonstrates, a survivor who has faced physical/psychological violence in her country of origin still suffers from the physical and psychological impact of the violence, even after nine years.

“When they took me into custody in 2012, I faced physical violence. They pushed me down from stairs and my knees got hurt as a result of this. I cannot even talk about verbal abuse. There was so much harassment that I cannot even tell you. They attack your femininity. This situation affects your psychology in every aspect. For example, when you charge your phone, a light comes on when it is full. Last night I plugged the phone and went to bed. When that light came on late at night, I thought the police entered the house with a panzer and woke up in a panic.” (Married, Woman, Turkey)

This interplay of physical and psychological violence also becomes a structural violence for many survivors as they face the long and repetitive documentation as part of the process of being recognized as a refugee and as a survivor in Sweden. This situation creates a challenge for integration as well as deepens mental health problems of survivors.

“I think it is psychological violence that they have repeatedly ask you the stories of harassment and rape that you experienced in the interviews. Because I go through the same feeling over and over again when I am discussing them. Nobody has the right to do this. But they insistently asked me what I have been through in custody in detail. I have already handed them the necessary reports.” (Single, Woman, Turkey)

In some cases, psychological violence is deeply embedded in the gendered cultural context that refugees bring with them when they arrive in Sweden. The gendered expectations that are traced to their country of origin can clash with the gender regime in Sweden so as to perpetuate violence. As refugee women from patriarchal cultural contexts learn their rights and empower themselves in their new setting, husbands can feel their dominant role in the household is threatened and psychological violence is employed, which can develop into physical violence. Refugee men can experience violence, not only as physical assault, but also in the form of threats to their masculinity, which can be experienced as a form of psychological violence.

Women survivors report that refugee men perceive the rights women have in Sweden as a threat to their masculine household role. The question of who has control of the bank card through which

Swedish social services provide financial support, is a conflict that might escalate from psychological violence to physical violence.

“So, he told me to give him my bank card because he needed money, so I refused, ‘Why would I give you my bank card? Tell me how much you need, and I will transfer you the amount. But if I give you the card, I won’t have any money left. So let me transfer you what you need and I keep the rest.’ Then he said, ‘You shouldn’t have money with you, because you won’t need it,’ and I told him, ‘What if I go to school and I need to get something on the way, or maybe I found some ingredients for dinner and I want to buy them?’ He said that he would give me if I needed it for something, and I told him, ‘No, I don’t have to go through that. I will transfer you whatever you need and then I will have money and so will you.’ After that he got angry, ‘Who are you for me to ask money from?’ etc.” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

A circumstance that maintains forced migrant women in a condition of strict control is the lack of accessible information, in particular regarding spousal separation and child custody. Many respondents clearly report they are scared to lose their children if they file for a divorce.

“My friend is worried that her kids will be taken away (if she files for a divorce). I told her to get divorced, I encouraged her. I told her, ‘The government wouldn’t take them away, they will take them if you stay with him and the neighbors hear about your problems. Then (the social services) would take the kids. But as long as you give those papers and prove how strong you are in front of the (social services) then the government would stand beside you against him.’” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

This fear of losing custody of one’s children as a result of declaring experience of SGBV expanded into a deeper sense of threat for many survivors. Widespread anxiety over losing one’s children because of the way they parent them was described.

“They don’t know these laws, so they get scared and do nothing instead. There are a lot of people who decided to raise their kids as they want and had their kids taken away from them because those people don’t know the law in the first place. Social (services) took them because they believed that the kids were at risk. Another Syrian family might have heard of the news and would start getting scared. They thus have increased psychological pressures because of their lack of knowledge in the field. The laws and culture in Sweden have led to a lot of psychological problems to people.” (Single, Woman, Syria)

This anxiety has become a form of structural violence whereby survivors of SGBV also question their everyday decisions, including actions that might otherwise help them to integrate into society.

“I went to (social services) and told them, ‘Maybe I do not understand the law well, I am sorry. I have to go to school, and sometimes my kids stay alone in the house they are 16, 14, 8 and 7 years old. Is it wrong that I leave them sometimes and go with my friends for coffee or lunch? Is it not my right as a mother to have one day to myself?’ and they said, ‘It is your

right, you do not have a baby who requires the extreme type of care. Because you have teenagers, there isn't a problem.' I tell them, 'Even if I go when my kids are asleep, I will go at 8 and come back at 10 maximum and I don't drink nor do drugs, all we do is drink some juice, laugh for a while and go back home.' I was stressed." (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

"Everyone here is worried of their kids being taken away from them, thankfully we don't do these things but there's a fear. Kids go to school and you feel like if you say something wrong to the teachers, they might call Sosyal [Socialen] and then your kids will be taken away from you. This is not logical. Why don't you help us when we need to sort our life and get a house or a job instead of taking our kids away?" (Married, Woman, Syria)

This pervasive fear of losing custody of one's children to the state can be described as a form of psychological violence. Such fear combines with features of the governance of migration, to create further psychological pressure that can be described as structural violence. The significant delay to the legal procedures governing asylum seeking put enormous pressure on survivors in Sweden. The process of waiting also is reported as one of the main problems hindering the integration process.

"The process of waiting for the permit limits me from every senses. I cannot integrate. I cannot become an active citizen. This is a psychological violence. In addition, the fake hope that some authorities gave us is a form of violence too." (Single, Man, Iraq)

Survivors also report how the uncertainty surrounding their future has an impact on their mental health. Moreover, the whole process of suffering starting from the country of origin which they fled, the journey and settlement triggers mental health problems.

"I got a problem when I first came to Sweden. After all, in my country and the journey. I had too much stress and depression because of thinking about my future and my family." (Married, Man, Afghanistan)

"The biggest hardship in my health was depression and the nervous breakdowns. I would feel so much pressure, and then in all of my body and all of my nerves, I couldn't breathe because of the societal pressure, my parents and everything else." (Single, Woman, Syria)

"Of course, I was affected, it affected our psychology and led to problems within our house." (Married, Man, Syria)

One of the ways in which mental health problems manifest is the lack of trust and isolation that survivors feel.

"He's getting better now, but the aftermath of the violence we endured is still present in my son. He was not capable of communicating, and lived in his own world, but he communicates better now, but the problem is with his speech now. He does not speak full

sentences yet, he can speak a couple of words but he will hopefully get better as the time passes.” (Divorced, Woman, Iraq)

“I felt very lonely here, I still feel the same, I can’t go out with my friends, because I don’t want to show them that I am sad.” (Single, Man, Afghanistan)

“I am afraid of meeting new people who don’t turn out to be good people.” (Married, Woman, Syria)

To conclude, psychological violence is closely related to other forms of violence, including physical violence and financial control. It is possible to trace the impact of physical violence that was experienced in the country of origin and which manifested itself as psychological violence in Sweden. On the other hand, psychological violence stemming from cultural and gendered contexts can be experienced as the root cause of physical violence. Understanding this symbiotic relation between two types of violence might help planning interventions to tackle both.

Barriers to recovery and integration

SGBV survivors constitute a diverse group consisting of people from different ethnic groups, marital status, sexual orientation, culture, religion and therefore their integration prospects differ from each other. Despite this heterogeneity, we can identify common inhibitors that hinder the recovery and integration of SGBV survivors. We have identified two common issues that prevent survivor recovery and integration opportunities: the extended and uncertain legal processes governing asylum seeking and the idea of traditional gender roles.

Survivors single out legal procedures around their asylum-seeking application as particularly damaging to their wellbeing. The impact of waiting several years before receiving a response to their asylum application creates a vortex of uncertainty which negatively affects survivors’ psychological situation.

“They made me sick, they destroyed us psychologically. My wife is probably sick too, from the concept of ‘What about tomorrow?’ For three years, I was waiting for a decision and they eventually told me, ‘Go to Algeria!’ What do I have in Algeria? My wife is Algerian but we were married in Syria, and I can’t even enter Algeria without a visa. They didn’t care about all of this. They said that they read some reports which showed that the Algerian wife can give her husband the nationality, so I should go there.” (Married, Man, Syria)

“Every day when I wake up, I wonder how long I will have to wait before I get a decision from the migration board so that I can live like a normal person, to be able to work, to have a normal flat, for my children to go to school. I really want to be part of Swedish society, but I do not know how long I must wait. It’s very tough for me to wait.” (Married, Woman, Afghanistan)

In addition to the damaging uncertainty posed by the prolonged wait, awareness that the migration laws had been changed in 2016 to make residency temporary rather than permanent and to reduce rights to family reunion, accentuated that uncertainty and was felt to be very negative by survivors.

“This is a great obstacle in my path for integration with the Swedish community. I want to learn Swedish, but I don’t have the time and I feel like I wasted time, and sometimes I give up. And I am one of the people who went to see a psychologist even though in our culture, we do not do that. I knew how important it was to go because I knew I should get out of the whirlwind I was in especially after that new law.” (Single, Man, Syria)

Prolonged waiting for official asylum decisions and the temporary nature of the residence permits if granted deepens the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness among the survivors, which prevents them to pursue activities that could ease their integration to the host community.

“I don’t feel like anyone can help.” (Married, Woman, Syria)

“I haven’t had any other than feeling empty but I think I am going to have some problems.” (Single, Man, Afghanistan)

“I don’t even sleep, there is no hope, I just see black I think very much, the only reason I go to school, I don’t learn anything, but it is just killing time it is not more than that.” (Single, Man, Afghanistan)

Finally, as discussed in the previous section, the idea of traditional gender roles constrain women’s ability to access protection services and to take up opportunities for integration. In many cases, forced migrants, and especially women, endure violence to comply with the gender roles that are justified with reference to the cultural contexts of their country of origin.

“In our culture, it considered shameful if a girl comes to her parents’ house sad due to problems with her husband, so imagine a divorce? They left Syria, and she imagined that the situation would get better, but it got worse.” (Widow, Woman, Syria)

“When he came back again, one of my daughters told me, ‘Mama, we don’t want him anymore.’ I told her, ‘We cannot live without a father especially in a foreign country,’ and my background does not allow me to leave him. What if people say, ‘She fled the country to be able to leave her husband abroad,’ no one knows what will happen and what people would say.” (Married, Woman, Syria)

The interplay between resilience and integration prospects

In addition to evidence of the harms arising from the experience of SGBV, accentuated by the circumstances of asylum, we also have evidence of the immense resilience that refugees demonstrate. Furthermore, once institutional mechanisms that are perceived to be threatening

subside, survivors can develop strategies to build up that resilience. It is noted that information dissemination is crucial to creating the circumstances in which forced migrants can build resilience. Critically, once survivors adapt their strategies and feel that institutional support is available, they tend to share information that supported their own resilience with other SGBV survivors in need. A divorced woman from Syria felt that having overcome her own problems, she could encourage her friend to do the same. Of her friend, she said:

“I helped her with it now, she took the step. I told her to break out of the fear. Ever since I broke out of it, I have not feared anyone.” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

The respondent quoted above explains it is the fear that “kills a woman” and once “the woman breaks out of the chains of fear, she would not care what the man does or thinks”. An interesting point here is that once they break ties with their oppressor, survivors demonstrate their resilience through doing things that would have been controversial in their culture of origin.

“I cannot say that I am not tired, I am, but I had to change for those around me. So I started taking care of myself better, I wore make-up and changed my clothing. I couldn’t live for myself only, because I could’ve done that, I could go out and live the life I want, I could go and get married and no one would find out, but I don’t want to do that, I want to live for my kids.” (Widow, Woman, Iraq)

Sometimes survivors of SGBV rely on their fellow survivors from a similar background but in some cases, they empower themselves and increase their resilience through social interaction with the wider host community.

“I had a lot of Swedish friends who helped me, they sympathized with me a lot because they regard us as Arab women [who have been] suppressed. They didn’t leave me at all in the hospital at all.” (Divorced, Woman, Syria)

“I started to feel comfortable after I got into the LGBT community because politics wasn’t that radical, plus, since we had our own “safe zone” we were having great time together.” (Single, (Homosexual) Man, Turkey)

The process of socialising with local people helps survivors to internalize the codes of new cultural context that they meet in Sweden which also improves the chances of integration. Especially, language learning and schooling opportunities open up new horizons for survivors for integration.

“For me that language was the key to make friends and to enter society. And then I learned at the same time as learning the language, I learned about life, about myself, about society, about history in Sweden and all. And this was great.” (Married, Woman, Afghanistan)

"I find school very nice. I meet new people and have a good time, like today, for the first time since I came to Sweden I laughed whole heartedly with my friends. Usually, I don't have much friends and I don't integrate well within groups. Whenever I want to meet new people, we would have different cultures and traditions." (Married, Woman, Syria)

Concluding Remarks

This paper discussed the experiences of forced migrants who were exposed to SGBV on their refugee journey from displacement to resettlement. Based on the analysis of data collected from 30 persons with different backgrounds, gender, age, ethnicity and legal status, it describes not only different manifestations of SGBV but also vulnerabilities, insecurities that were deepened throughout different phases of their journey. Various forms of violence interweave in forced migrants' accounts of their experience; physical, emotional, psychological and controlling behaviour including financial restrictions. Ideas around what constitutes appropriate gendered behaviour were cited as crucial to the painful experience of being subject to violence as a forced migrant man, and also as a reason given for husbands perpetrating violence on their wives in the domestic setting. Violence featured in all phases of the forced migration journey and the gendered harms could persist long after the moments of violence had taken place. Women's experience of violence from husbands was exacerbated when she had arrival on a spousal visa, with the husband a Swedish national.

While the fear of violence from other people (forced migrants and others) and an inability to trust new acquaintances was damaging to people's wellbeing and to their ability to integrate, so too was the fear that statutory powers would exacerbate personal or family difficulties, if the SGBV came to light; in particular losing custody of one's children and having an asylum application interrupted. The extended waiting periods for migration governance decisions and the sudden weakening of asylum seekers' conditions of residency in 2016 were noted as damaging forced migrants' ability to re-build a daily life as well as to their mental wellbeing. Gendered roles that were attributed to the home country were said to prevent women from leaving abusive homes and marriages. Women's ignorance of their rights to divorce and to support from social services was described as a factor preventing ameliorative action.

Despite the negative impacts of SGBV experience on their efforts to build resilience and integrate to the society, respondents described making the most of the resources that were made available to them to integrate into wider society. Furthermore, they were keen to support other new arrivals with knowledge about services and support.

Notable in our material is the complex way in which the experience of violence interacts with structural factors, such as migration governance, so as to exacerbate the harms of SGBV. The interweaving of physical and psychological violence have implications not only for people's wellbeing and integration prospects but also their basic life conditions. The overarching aim of this research project was to identify the difference that makes a difference in supporting refugees who have experienced SGBV. The interweaving of different forms of violence, the structural

exacerbation of harms at the level of the individual or family and the co-constitution of wellbeing with stable residency and therefore ability to pursue integration mean that a multi-sectoral, interdisciplinary approach is strongly mandated.

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