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Experiences of Arabic-speaking refugee survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence living in Australia

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

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Introduction

Currently, at the time of writing, there are 89.3 million forcibly displaced worldwide and, of whom, 27.1 million are refugees (European Commission, 2022). It is well documented that high levels of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SBGV) are experienced by forced migrants across their diverse experiences and journeys (Hourani et al., 2021; Ozcurumez et al., 2020). This working paper is part of the wider SEREDA project which is a multi-country study that investigates the nature of SGBV experiences by forced migrants. The findings presented in this working paper are based on project data that was collected in Australia. The working paper begins by providing a theoretical overview of how we conceptualise violence, followed by a brief description of the Australian policy context, methods and a note on ethics. Our findings are divided into types of SGBV experienced, SGBV services and support, impacts of SGBV, and resilience factors, followed by some concluding remarks.

Conceptualising violence

SGBV is an overarching term that is used to cover a broad spectrum of violence that includes a gendered element (Hynes & Cardozo, 2000; Simon-Butler & McSherry, 2018). This working paper adopts the characterisation of SGBV against forced migrants as having three distinct yet interlinked forms: interpersonal, structural and symbolic (Hourani et al., 2021; Montesanti, 2015). These forms of violence are dynamically linked across space and time through fluid social, political and economic processes that shape violence in both private and public spheres and as used and experienced by different actors (Krause, 2017).

Interpersonal violence is defined as violence perpetrated by individuals, including intimate partner violence (IPV), violence perpetrated between family members, and other types of violence enacted between individuals (Montesanti, 2015; World Health Organisation, 2019). In the context of forced migration, inter-personal SGBV includes violence perpetrated by militia, smugglers, traffickers, local authorities, border officials, other forced migrants, members of host communities, friends, family members, and intimate partners (Canning, 2017).

Structural violence describes forms of violence that are built into the fabric of society and upheld by institutions, including governments and government institutions, through custom, practice and law (Jones, 2000; Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). Structural violence thus creates and maintains social inequalities on the basis of factors such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, and immigration status (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). Structural violence results in differential access to information, resources, voice, agency and representation (Jones, 2000). In the context of forced migration, structural SGBV is often enacted through immigration policies and when institutions and governments fail to respond to the needs of forced migrants, thus enabling and reproducing discriminatory sexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic norms (Marsh et al., 2006; Menendez-Menendez, 2014; Montesanti & Thurston, 2015; Ozcurumez et al., 2018, 2020).

The term symbolic violence was originally coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1979) to describe violence that is non-physical and that manifests in power differentials between social groups (Bourdieu, 1979). In this working paper, we use symbolic violence to describe the ideologies, behaviours, words, and non-verbal communications that produce, enable, and reproduce gendered violence (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015; Thapar-Bjorkert et al., 2016).

In this paper, we provide examples of these different forms of violence and, in doing so, illustrate how different forms of SGBV are enacted in the context of forced migration. Understanding the interconnected nature of these different forms of violence is critical for the development of more holistic policy and practice interventions that prevent and respond to violence (Grych & Swan, 2012).

Australian policy context

The Australian Humanitarian Migration Program settles approximately 14,000 refugees per annum, including people on Women at Risk visas. Forced migrants settled through this program receive a range of supports following arrival, including health, welfare, social and education services, generally for a period of five years. During the Covid-19 pandemic, humanitarian visas continued to be granted to forced migrants outside Australia, although there were restrictions on arrivals to Australia. People fleeing violence and persecution may also settle in Australian following entry on a range of other permanent-pathway visas, including spousal, skilled or family reunion visas.

By way of contrast, people seeking asylum in Australia *after* arrival - typically following entry on a tourist, student, business or other temporary visa - have limited entitlements. Asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia make up a very small minority of Australia's forced migrant population. Up until March 2019, asylum seekers arriving by boat were detained in offshore detention centres under the Pacific Solution and Operation Sovereign Borders policies. Up until recently, asylum seekers in Australia who were relocated from offshore detention centres as part of the 'Medivac program' were held in hotel detention.

The majority of survivors recruited in the Australian arm of the SEREDA project arrived in Australia as part of the Humanitarian Migration Program. In 2015, the Australian Government agreed to settle an additional 12,000 Syrian refugees, prioritising women, children and families. Many of the survivors who participated in the SEREDA project arrived in Australia through this route. The remainder of the survivors recruited arrived in Australia through spousal visas. No current asylum participated in this research.

Methods

The findings presented in this working paper are based on 16 qualitative research interviews conducted with forced migrant survivors of SGBV. The SEREDA Project adopted a broad definition of forced migrants to include anyone who was fleeing from violence or persecution, regardless of their official or legal status.

Table 1 provides a summary of interviewees. All the interviewees recruited were women and a large majority of them were between 31 and 50 years old. Most of the interviewees were from Syria and Iraq, with almost half having completed tertiary education. The majority had been in Australia for over 4 years, with a smaller proportion having recently arrived within the 2 years prior to being interviewed.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Characteristics	**Interview participants (*N* = 16)**
Age	
31-40	6
41-50	7
51-60	2
Not disclosed	1
Country of Origin	
Iraq	5
Syria	6
Lebanon	3
Egypt	1
Eretria	1
Relationship status	
Married	7
Separated	5
Divorced	4
Length of time in Australia	
<1 year	0
1 - 2 years	5
3 - 4 years	1
>4 years	10
Not disclosed	0
Educational attainment	
Primary	1
Secondary	4
Tertiary	7
Not disclosed	4

The majority of participants were recruited into the study through two partner organisations to which the interviewees had disclosed SGBV as clients. Both organisations were community-based multicultural organisations. One of the organisations is focused on providing welfare support to Arabic-speaking clients, and the other provides social services to disadvantaged people living in a geographic area of Melbourne that has a large demographic of Arabic-speaking refugees. A small number of participants were also recruited through snowball sampling. After being approached, all participants who agreed to take part in the research filled out a "Permission to Pass on Contact Details Form" which was passed on to the relevant SEREDA team member who subsequently called the participant, explained the research project, and scheduled a time for the interview.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Arabic by Author 1, J.H., who is a native Arabic speaker. Before each interview, J.H. repeated the study information and provided participants with a Plain Language statement and a written consent form, both of which had been translated into Arabic. Verbal consent to record the interview was sought separately.

The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated by Author 1. All interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All the participants' names in this working paper have been changed and participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

A note on ethics

Institutional ethics approval was received by the University of Melbourne and included a safety protocol to ensure participant and staff safety and support.

Findings

Types of SGBV

SGBV survivors' had experienced a range of types of violence from a range of different perpetrators at different stages of their journeys. In the sections that follow, we present the different forms of violence experienced by survivors, as well as the different ways that survivors understand and talk about SGBV.

Forms of violence

The most common form of violence experienced and described by survivors was IPV. However, some survivors also described experiences of physical violence from militia in their country of origin.

> *"They [the militia] kidnapped my sister from the hospital door where she works. No one knows who kidnapped her. Sometimes, I want to ask her and find out but my little sister… The one that was kidnapped and I are twins, and our little sister told me that she gets really sensitive and triggered when talking about what happened and so not to bring it up. And honestly, we couldn't believe when she recovered so we don't want to re-open those wounds for her. So, I don't bring it up"*
> – Mona, Syria

Some survivors alluded to the symbolic violence that enabled the interpersonal violence that they experienced. In the quote below, a survivor describes how patriarchal beliefs and her religion were contributing factors to the physical violence perpetrated against her.

> *"I was an Arabic teacher and they used to target teachers because they [the militia] didn't want schools to stay open, so I was kidnapped 3 times and I escaped… like they let me go all 3 times. First of all, I'm a teacher and they didn't want teachers or schools. Second of all, because I am a woman, in their view, the woman needs to wear a headscarf and dress a certain way and sit at home and that's it. And third of all, because I'm Christian and they perceived Christians as the enemy… so they even wanted Christian women to wear a headscarf, but I didn't want to"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Some survivors described experiences of forced marriage. This usually came about in one of two ways: either through family pressure and norms - manifestations of symbolic violence - which often occurred in their country of origin; or because survivors saw no feasible pathway

to fleeing conflict other than to marry someone in a safe country – resulting from the structural violence of closed borders.

> *"He was my cousin and so it was a forced marriage. I was forced to marry him. They (my family) had ideas and norms and behaviours that I had to abide by and they said I needed to marry him"*
> – Mariana, Iraq

As noted above, the most common form of violence spoken about by survivors was IPV and survivors described a range of different types of IPV including physical violence, sexual violence, verbal abuse and threats, and financial violence.

When describing their experiences of IPV, women often spoke about the different forms of violence at the same time. For example, the quote below illustrates a survivor speaking of both physical violence and verbal abuse and threats.

> *"He would shout a lot and say a lot of nasty things and be really violent and he used to not say things like that when they [her children] were around but near the end, he would say things in front of all 3 of them like 'I'm going to keep beating you until you die'"*
> – Sabrine, Syria

Many survivors also described experiences of marital rape. The quote below is from a woman who arrived in Australia on a spousal visa.

> *"He raped me twice. You could hear my screams at the end of the earth. Even my neighbours heard. On one side we had a Macedonian woman and on the other side there was an Albanian woman and they both heard my screams"*
> – Rola, Lebanon

Some women described experiences of physical abuse, such as hitting and beating, as 'punishment' for when they didn't want to have sex with their husbands, illustrating again how multiple forms of violence (in this case physical violence and sexual violence) are perpetrated at the same time. Some survivors also experienced physical abuse during pregnancy which they shared during their interviews.

> *"I was asleep and he started beating me while I was lying down. I wasn't scared about my face, I was scared he would cause a miscarriage, I was scared for my unborn child"*
> – Fatima, Lebanon

Another survivor spoke of physical violence during pregnancy, as well as sexual violence after she gave birth.

> *"I mean I got beaten in every pregnancy. The first, second and third. All of them. In the second pregnancy, when he would hit me, I would lose consciousness, and third as well… It doesn't stop! And it's not just the physical violence, even the other things… Like, your*

pregnant and carrying a life inside you, after you give birth and you're tired, he would force himself on me sexually"
– Sabrine, Syria

Many survivors also described experiences of financial abuse. In the quote below, the interviewee describes being given an allowance by her husband as well as a lack of freedom in purchasing household and personal items such as sanitary pads.

"He used to give me $100 per month, and whatever I needed for the house, he would buy… Even sanitary pads, he would go and buy them for me, because I wasn't allowed to do anything"
– Rola, Lebanon

Influence of migration-related factors on SGBV

For the most part, survivors spoke of experiences of IPV in the resettlement context. However, most survivors who experienced IPV during resettlement also experienced IPV during other stages of their migration journey but reported the violence getting worse during each successive stage. For example, in the quote below, a survivor speaks about violence getting worse upon seeking refuge in Jordan from Iraq.

"In Jordan, yes [the violence got worse]. He tried to kill me twice. Once, with a knife and another time he tried to suffocate me with a pillow. He took a pillow and put it over my face and sat on it so I couldn't breathe"
– Nadia, Iraq

Another survivor described her husband's temper being much shorter in Australia than it was in their country of origin.

"He gets angry now. He never used to angry before. I used to be the one that got angry easily when we were living in Egypt"
– Evelyn, Egypt

In all cases, survivors alluded to symbolic and structural factors that contributed to increased perpetration of IPV against them in the resettlement context. For example, the quote below illustrates how a survivor did not feel like she could leave her abusive marriage in her country of origin due to symbolic violence that manifested as cultural and religious norms around marriage and stigma around divorce.

"I wasn't able to do anything because, for us, our norms and values… these things are enforced on us. I used to tell my mum but she would say things like 'this is our religion' and 'all men are like this' and 'don't tell anyone' or 'don't speak to anyone about this' and 'it would ruin our reputation' and things like that… After a year, when my parents heard that he would hit me and do those things, my dad tried to go to the priest for him to allow us to get a divorce but the priest said it wasn't allowed"
– Nadia, Iraq

Some women interviewed arrived on spousal visas and were married to men who were born and raised in Australia. These women often described how this exacerbated a power imbalance between them and their husbands, as their husbands would have a stronger grasp of the language, services, and general understanding of Australian systems and processes. This power imbalance was used to perpetrate further violence against them. For instance, the quote below illustrates how a survivor's husband made her believe that he needed her passport in order to get her a SIM card and how this lie was used by the perpetrator to gain possession of her and her children's passports.

> *"Once, he tricked us and said he wanted our passports to get us mobile phones so that we could communicate with each other, so I gave him the passports, and then the next day I was speaking to the neighbour… He originally didn't want to get us phones because he wanted any phone call that I got to go through him so that he would know what was happening. So, then the neighbour asked me 'why did he take your passport?' and I told her 'so that he can get us phones' and she said 'you don't need passports for that – what does your passport have to do with a mobile phone?' and she lost it…"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Similarly, the quote below describes how a perpetrator prevented his wife from gaining citizenship through knowingly providing the immigration office with a card number for a bank account that had no money in it and also redirecting all mail to the post office so that his wife could not read her own mail.

> *"I filled out the form for Citizenship form and took it to immigration… He signed it for me and gave them, like he was meant to give them a credit card so they could process the application, but he gave them the card number of a credit card that doesn't work or has no money on it. So, they sent him a letter saying that the payment had been rejected but he had redirected all the mail to go to the post office because he didn't want it to come to the house where I could read it… So, he would collect the post and then decide to what to hide and what to give to me. I was waiting… this year coming up I will have been in this country for 10 years. 8 and a half years I've been waiting for my citizenship to come through"*
> – Rola, Lebanon

In some cases, even when both husband and wife arrived from their country of origin together, gendered structural barriers to English language classes (such as a lack of childcare) resulted in differences in power that enabled violence to perpetrated in the resettlement context. The quote below illustrates this.

> *''My husband used to work with the Americans in Iraq so he used to speak English really well but I needed an interpreter for everything. He used to tell me things that were incorrect but I thought he knew. Even when letters would come from the embassy, Centrelink and the government addressed to me, I would ask him what it said and he would say 'I don't know how to read it' and he would just take his own letters and go to his room"*
> – Nadia, Iraq

Some survivors reflected on the reasons why the migration context resulted in increased perpetration of IPV against them. In these cases, survivors would mostly attribute this to their husbands feeling a loss of purpose and control over their lives and families which contributed to feelings of frustration. Women often believed that this was the source of the violence that they were subjected to.

> *"I'll tell you why… it's because in Kuwait he used to work two jobs so he'd come home exhausted. He would come home, eat and the go straight to sleep – he had no free time. Now, all he has is free time. This has frustrated him and he takes out his frustration on me. Who do I have to take out my frustration on? No one. I just cry"*
> – Evelyn, Egypt

SGBV services and support

Survivors described a range of formal and informal services that they accessed, as well as barriers to accessing services, and gaps in services or issues that are still unresolved for them.

Types of services accessed

Most of the women spoke about accessing family violence support through settlement and multicultural services. Women spoke of the importance of trust that had been built with social workers and other settlement workers over a long period of time since settlement services were the first people they spoke to upon arrival. The trust that had been built meant that survivors felt more comfortable disclosing their experiences to settlement and multicultural services. Participants also expressed reluctance to access family violence specific services due to associated stigma and potential risks to their personal safety. In the quote below, a woman who was in an IPV situation described how accessing violence support from a settlement service was perceived as less suspicious by her perpetrator and thus enabled her to access support.

> *"When we left the [intake] room, he [the perpetrator] asked me what I wanted to talk to her [the settlement worker] about. I was scared that he [the perpetrator] would hit me or something, so I told him that my body was aching and so I wanted to ask if they could transfer me to a hospital for free, through the settlement organisation, so that I could do some tests. So he just said "yes, ok". She [the settlement worker] also told me not to say anything to him and I told her what I had told him so then she said to him [the perpetrator] that she was going to transfer me to a hospital. So, after that, when we'd communicate, I would text her and tell her there's been an incident [of violence] and then she'd respond and ask if she could call and I'd often say no because he [the perpetrator] was in the house. So, when he would leave the house, I would text her to call and she would call and explain what happened"*
> - Mariana, Iraq

Women spoke highly of the services they accessed and highlighted the important role that the organisations played in providing them with the material support needed to leave violent situations they were in, cope with previous violence they had experienced, integrate into their new communities, and move on with their lives. In the quote below, a survivor expresses her gratitude towards the social worker that helped her furnish her new accommodation after she left an IPV situation.

"The social worker helped me so much, she used to come over all the time. You know, I didn't even have a couch to sit on and she helped me. When I left him I had nothing, nothing at all"
– Layla, Lebanon

With regards to integrating into their new communities and moving on with their lives, many women spoke about the importance of women's groups that helped them to do so. Many survivors interviewed either first disclosed their experiences in a group setting, or gained the confidence to disclose to their social worker after they had attended women's group sessions. The two quotes below illustrate the importance of such women's groups.

"I went to the library and I asked… I told them I wanted to join a woman's group. I like… because I had done volunteer work with the women's union in Syria, so I was interested in taking part in something like that, and I know that there were programs around physical and mental health for women, plus they were in Arabic… and so that made the situation of leaving easier for me and in the end, I told the social worker that I don't want to stay with him anymore and she said ok, and got me a lawyer… She was a female, and she went with me to the court and we filed an intervention order"
– Sabrine, Syria

Barriers to accessing services

Interviewees described a number of barriers to accessing services. These ranged from fear to lack of awareness of services or misconceptions around services.

Fear

Many survivors described a fear of accessing family-violence specific services that was ongoing at the time of the interview or that they had held at some point since their arrival. Some survivors described a fear of disclosure, while others described a fear of their husbands finding out and their potential response. The first quote below demonstrates this fear of disclosure, while the second quote provides an example of fear of her husband finding out. In both cases, this fear is rooted in the possibility that things might change for the worse if the woman discloses the violence that she is experiencing.

"I said to her 'I want to tell you something'… The first time I was scared, I was scared they would take my kids"
– Nadia, Iraq

"So what if I talk? In the end, what would I benefit? Tell me, what would happen? How would I benefit? I'm scared they'll take my husband away or do something to him. If he knew I was talking to you, or that I was talking to anyone, he would be very bad to me. I am so scared of his reaction if he knew I was speaking to you and telling you these things"
– Evelyn, Egypt

In many cases, this fear was also exacerbated by a lack of family or social support services for survivors who are new in the country and haven't established friendships, networks, or relationships yet.

> *"I was covered in bruises, bite marks, cuts, but I didn't know who to go to. I never used to leave the house – I didn't have anyone"*
> – Layla, Lebanon

Lack of knowledge or awareness of services

Many survivors described a lack of knowledge around services including of what was available to them and what services they were eligible for. In the quote below, the interviewee expresses that had she known what services were available to her, she would have sought support earlier.

> *"I didn't even know what a social worker was at that stage. If I knew, I would've run away before then"*
> – Layla, Lebanon

This quote also demonstrates that this survivor was delayed in finding out or being informed of what services were available to her. This was re-iterated later in the interview.

> *"It was only 2 years later that I heard about Vincent Care. One of my friends got divorced and someone told her that they help you so I went there and they gave me a couch, and a fridge, and things like that. They helped me a lot, they even gave me food vouchers. This was after 2 years"*
> *- Layla, Lebanon*

Other survivors also outlined delays experienced in finding out about and subsequently accessing services. The quote below further illustrates this.

> *"That's the problem – I don't even know what services are available to me. Like I said, it was only 3 days ago that someone told me what is available to me. I don't know what I'm eligible for – no one told me. No one has ever referred me. For example, my husband and I want to apply for social housing but we don't know where to go, what to do, who to speak to, how to apply"*
> – Evelyn, Egypt

Some survivors believed that there would be an expectation that they would have to leave their husbands if they accessed family violence services. The quote below illustrates this.

> *"I wouldn't want to seek support from organisations anyway because they would want to separate me from my husband, and I don't accept that. That's not part of our culture and upbringing"*
> – Zainab, Syria

For the woman quoted above, she did not want to leave her husband because she did not believe that divorce was part of her culture. However, for some other survivors, the

reluctance to leave their partners was based on a material reliance on them due to power differentials mentioned in the previous section, such as financial reliance or a lack of grasp of the English language. These power differentials also enabled perpetrators to prevent victims from accessing services. For example, the quote below illustrates how a perpetrator lied about services to his wife in order to scare her away from seeking support.

> *"The only thing he used to tell me about Australia was that if you misbehaved in public, they take your kids away from you and put you in prison. When I told my case manager what he does to me, I said 'he does this and this but please don't take my children away from me' and she said 'who's going to take your children away from you?' I told her that they would and then they told me that no one would take them away"*
> – Nadia, Iraq

Gaps in service delivery

Survivors described a number of different gaps in service delivery and current support needs. This included material needs such as housing and employment opportunities, but survivors also disclosed negative experiences with interpreters and an ongoing feeling of lack of safety.

Housing

Housing regularly came up in interviews as a gap in support and service delivery and a current priority for survivors. Respondents often spoke about the unaffordability of housing, as well as negative experiences with landlords or agents.

> *"But if only I had government housing, and didn't have to pay rent. The agent is always on my back, telling me to pay… if you are late by one day, he won't stop calling you. It's really hard. Every 2 weeks, I have to take into account rent. I pay $1300 per month here for this place, plus bills and insurance, it's a lot... The hardest thing to ask for is housing. I just want a room, nothing more, so that every day the agent is saying things to me like 'get out of the house, pay the rent, you're late'… Finding housing was the hardest part. If they kick me out of here, I would have nowhere to go"*
> – Layla, Lebanon

Employment

All survivors interviewed in this project had the legal right to seek and attain employment. Despite this, many interviewees expressed difficulty in finding work due to a lack of employment opportunities as well as a lack of appropriate childcare options.

> *"The problem that leaves you constantly stressed is this pressure to find a job, and at the same time, things are closing and business here is bad – businesses are closing… Plus I have a son who's 6 years old, where can I find a job that goes from 6am to 3pm because my son finishes school at 3:30pm? And with after-school care, he gets really stressed, I'm always thinking of him and he's always thinking of me and what time I'm coming to pick him up. Like, now I've got him in after school care, and it's really expensive, it costs a lot… even though there's an 80% subsidy from the government but it's not enough. Like if every two weeks, it costs $137 for before and after case, and it's expensive even though Centrelink is covering 80% of it"*
> – Rola, Lebanon

A few survivors also expressed the belief that an added benefit of employment would be that it would enable them to improve their English. They believed that learning on the job was the best way to improve their English language skills.

> *"If I worked, I think I would be better. If I worked, it would make a difference to my mental health. It would put me at ease. I think work is better than English lessons, you learn the language on the job whereas at school they give you worksheets and things like that so it's less useful. I would learn more on the job but no one is understanding that"*
> – Nadia, Iraq

Negative experiences with interpreters

Some survivors described negative experiences with interpreters when accessing services which resulted in feelings of disempowerment and frustration.

> *"You know, I hate interpreters. I'm sorry but they're really irritating sometimes. The interpreters, sometimes they help you and are good and other times they are not. I can understand English pretty well… The other day I was on the phone with someone to fix the internet and I overheard him saying something wrong on the phone. I heard the interpreter saying something wrong. So, I corrected the interpreter and said, 'no that's not what I meant' and then I eventually hung up because I didn't want to continue with that interpreter"*
> – Layla, Lebanon

Ongoing lack of safety

Many survivors disclosed that they still fear for their safety despite having sought and accessed all the support that was available to them. For example, in the quote below, a survivor describes her perpetrator still threatening her and following her even after she had gained a protection visa (she was previously on a spousal visa) and moved into her own house.

> *"Now I'm on a protection visa. My kids and I, yeh. But the problem for me was that, even though I got the protection visa, I wasn't happy because he kept following me, and threatening me, and giving me trouble. Like, he didn't stop when we left the house, it continued"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Impacts of SGBV

Survivors described the impacts of SGBV which included physiological and psychological impacts, as well as the impacts of SGBV on integration. Many respondents also spoke about the impact of SGBV on their children.

Physiological impacts of SGBV

Interviewees disclosed physiological health impacts of SGBV. In the quote below, the respondent talks about how her experiences of physical violence resulted in her having brain injury.

"Here [since arriving in Australia], he's hit me about 5 or 6 times… the most recent time I had a stroke because of it. He hit me on my head, and I went to the doctor and she said I had a head injury from the beating. It was like a mini stroke"
– Diyana, Iraq

In many cases, the line between the psychological and physiological consequences of violence were blurred. For example, the survivors quoted below described how her feeling mentally unwell resulted in her feeling physically unwell.

"My tears never dried because of how upset I was. And, really, like when someone's mental health is so bad, their whole body… Like I got physically sick. I've never been like that in my life, honestly… I had low iron levels and I had low levels of Vitamin D and all of these other physical health problems"
– Mona, Syria

Similarly, the women quoted below describe how physical violence had serious mental health consequences, illustrating how inter-connected both physical and mental health is for many women.

"Umm, they used to tell me that this was a nervous breakdown. The most severe time, which was the most recent time, they told me that it was a really strong nervous breakdown, and they did brain imaging and it turned out that I had… Like, there was, like a clot in my head that was a symptom of a head injury… and my blood pressure went up to an abnormal level, and so did my sugar levels, as a result of the trauma. So, they started treating me, and when they released me from the hospital, they referred me to a specialist doctor… A psychologist and I still go to appointments with him until now"
– Nayla, Syria

Psychological impacts of SGBV

Survivors described the mental health and wellbeing impacts of the violence perpetrated against them. Many described being happy and cheerful 'before' and feeling constantly sad and upset 'after'.

"I was completely broken inside and have nothing left… I used to be so happy and such a cheerful person. Now, I hardly laugh"
– Mona, Syria

Some survivors also spoke about how experiences of their material conditions exacerbated their mental ill-health upon leaving the relationship. In these instances, women who have left violent relationships have exacerbated mental ill-health due to lack of social or government support. Both of the quotes below illustrate this.

"So now, I've been exposed to a lot of strain on my mental health because I'm unable to get a job and I was thinking what would happen if the money ran stopped and I could no longer afford rent, and the landlord kicks me and my son out of the house… and yeh I was speaking to a counsellor about it and explaining to her all these thoughts"
– Mariana, Iraq

Impact of SGBV on integration

In many cases, survivors described how the physiological and psychological impacts of SGBV have also impacted their ability to integrate in Australia. In the quote below, the survivor describes how her poor mental health has impacted her ability to integrate because she doesn't feel like she has the mental strength or energy to even leave the house.

> *"You know, this has really impacted my mental health – I'm in a state of depression. There are days where I can't even leave the house, I don't want to see people because of this issue. I feel like I'm being choked.*
> – Layla, Lebanon

In many cases, it is the intention of the perpetrator to prevent the victim from integrating to create and reinforce a power imbalance between them. The quote below provides an example of this in the context of driving lessons.

> *"He wouldn't let me learn to drive, no. He wouldn't let me learn. He didn't want to pay for driving lessons. Only near the end did he start teaching me to drive, like just before I left him. Every 2 or 3 weeks he'd let me do 1 lesson. The driver instructor said that one lesson is not enough. It wasn't consistent enough for me to learn anything"*
> – Fatima, Lebanon

Many survivors spoke of a lack of trust they now felt towards strangers and community members due to their SGBV experiences. In the quote below, a survivor explains how she doesn't give her address out to anyone due to fear.

> *"I don't my address or my phone number to anyone, especially not anyone to do with him. A lot of people tried to get my number or address, but I said no. I said if you want to see me, we meet at the local shopping centre and decide on the date and time now. I told people the suburb I live in but where exactly, no way"*
> – Rola, Lebanon

This quote above also reinforces the notion mentioned earlier that, despite accessing services, many survivors continue to fear for their personal safety.

A few survivors spoke of the stigma they faced from their communities because of leaving their husbands and / or getting a divorce.

> *"No one from our community really wants to befriend a divorced woman. My situation here makes it very hard. I thought here people would be more open minded but that's not the case"*
> – Nadia, Iraq

Impact of SGBV on Children

Survivors also spoke of the impact of SGBV on their children. This included feelings of fear amongst their children, physiological impacts of violence on children, as well as caring responsibilities of children.

Fear

Survivors spoke of the fear their children felt upon witnessing violence being perpetrated against their mother.

> *"My kids and I used to sleep in one bed, the 3 of us. I would sleep in the middle and then one of my kids on each side. We would sleep together and wake up together. If we wanted to leave the room in his house, we all left the room together because we were scared of him"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Physiological impacts

Some survivors also attributed physical, behavioural and mental health issues experienced by their children to the impact of witnessing violence. Both the quotes below illustrate this.

> *"My daughter … she always used to wet herself so she would wear diapers. She only stopped wearing them recently because the diaper would make noise and one of her friends at school saw it and made fun of her, so she started crying and didn't want to wear them anymore. She's 8 years old. She's still wetting herself though, so I told the teachers to send her to the bathroom so everyone hour or half hour they tell her to go the bathroom"*
> – Nadia, Iraq

> *"My daughter started having, like, heart palpitations and she started having an overactive thyroid, so it impacted her as well… It was only 2 months ago that she stopped getting treatment. She had a heart problem because of what happened. My son… he started having something that resembles autism, like he started becoming anti-social, he started hating people, never leaving the house… Like, he would come home from school and just sit by himself until the next day when he goes to school. He would never go anywhere or want anyone to come to our house"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Caring responsibilities

Some survivors spoke of unfair caring responsibilities they felt like they had placed on their children due to the violence that was being perpetrated. Survivors often expressed that they felt their children had to mature or grow up too quickly in order to support their mothers who were experiencing violence. In the quote below, a survivor describes the responsibility her children took on for her safety after an attempted suicide.

> *"Yes, of course [I tried to commit suicide]. That's why my kids never leave my side. When we first got the visa and they would want to go to something like go to Centrelink, or if I needed to somewhere and they wanted to go somewhere else, they would call me often and ask if I was ok. Even when they started going to school and University and I started going to English lessons, they would call me during their breaks at school to make sure that I was ok, they would ask where I was and who I was with… they're really scared for me"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Resilience Factors

Survivors described an array of different factors that supported their resilience. These ranged from coping mechanisms such as faith and prayer, to things that enabled them to find strength and resilience such as gaining independence, having hope for the future, and thinking of their children's futures.

Faith

Many women spoke of faith and prayer as a coping mechanism that helped them overcome the negative impacts of the violence they were experiencing. The quote below illustrates this.

> *"I mean, for me, because I am a stronger believer, I always used to read the Quran and listen to the Quran, even when I was waiting for the bus… I mean for 13 years I spent so much time on public transport, I would carry my small Quran in my handbag and read it until the bus came. I would pray for God to give me the patience and I would even pray for God to bless him so that he would change and become a better person. What gave me strength was my faith, and there's an afterlife, and in the end, there is justice and God is with the oppressed"*
> – Sabrine, Syria

In some instances, women even drew on religious scripture to fight for their marriage rights. In the quote below, a survivor recounts a conversation that she had with a religious leader who was trying to persuade her to stay with her abusive husband.

> *"Yes, we were raised in Lebanon during hard times and in a lot of poverty, and whatever… but I'm not someone who's desperate enough for you [the Sheikh] to come here and tell me he [my husband] has a religious right to treat me like that, and what is religiously acceptable and not religiously acceptable. Since you're a Sheikh, go open the Quran and see what God has revealed in his writing in terms of Women's rights, separate to what are rights for both men and women and separate to marriage rights… Go see what's in the Quran, you have Surah Al-Nisaa (chapter of the woman) and Surah Al-Baqara (chapter of the cow) and you can also go read about how much the Prophet cared about women and believed in women's rights… and he said 'is that the last thing you have to say?' and I said 'yeh that's the last thing I have to say – is there anything else that needs to be discussed?'"*
> – Rola, Lebanon

Similarly, in the quote below, a survivor describes using religious teachings to defend herself against her husband who was attempting marital rape.

> *"He wouldn't respond when I would say to him that religiously, he's not entitled. I would say to him, 'you're not allowed to come near me' because I know that, religiously, a man can't force himself on a woman if she doesn't want to have sex with him, it's not allowed"*
> – Sabrine, Syria

Independence

Women also spoke more generally about how gaining a sense of independence provided them with feelings of empowerment. For example, the quote below illustrates how a survivor felt empowered from learning how to take the bus and go to the shops on her own.

> *"I wasn't comfortable before. I was so stressed from how much I used to sit at home by myself and think and think… I was so stressed… but then when I learnt how to take the bus, I slowly started going to the shops on my own, go for a walk, go buy things with the vouchers that red cross would give to me, and then come back. Leaving the house was good for my mental health, it relaxed me at bit, instead of sitting at home by myself and waiting for him to pick me up and drop me off. I relaxed because I was able to meet people like if my friend told me she was at the shops, I could say 'ok, I'll get the bus and come meet you' and then I'd meet up with her and we'd sit and have a coffee. At least I would get a change of scenery"*
> – Fatima, Lebanon

Visa or migration status

Many survivors described feelings of relief and hope once they received a positive visa outcome. The quote below illustrates the sense of relief that a survivor felt meaning that she could now move on with her life and start building an independent life for herself, reinforcing the importance of independence as a resilience factor.

> *"I get a call from the lawyer, as soon as I saw the private number, I knew that it was from the lawyer. I only understand a little bit of what she was saying… that she was going to dial in an interpreter, but you need to stay calm. When she said to me that I need to stay calm, I felt like they had rejected the visa. I started crying and said to her 'I am calm but tell me what happened' and since I was crying and holding the phone, people started staring at me and thinking that there was something wrong… I had forgotten that there were people around. Anyway, so then the interpreter comes on the phone and introduces himself and I said 'yes I know but can you please tell me what she wants because I'm really anxious' and he told her what I said and then she said ok and then I heard the words 'congratulations' in English and I know what word means so I told him 'I understood! They accepted the visa' and he said 'please calm down so that I can listen to what she's saying and then tell you' and I told him 'I understood – I got the visa!' and I just collapsed on the ground in the middle of the shopping centre. Everyone came to see if I was ok, there was a man trying to speak to me in Arabic because he heard me speaking Arabic on the phone and everyone was asking me whether I needed help and I said 'no, no, I don't need anything, I don't need anything – I got the visa!!!' and I was shouting and screaming in the middle of the shopping centre and so excited that I got the visa, and then I called each of the kids, and they started crying to, and yeh… And our lives became more stable after that point, the kids started going to school and I started doing English classes and now my English is so much better than it was at the beginning, and I'm much more self-confident, and I started writing for the newspaper – I used to be an Arabic teacher and so I write well in Arabic and there's an Arabic newspaper in Sydney that really liked my writing so they asked me to be their correspondent in Melbourne and cover news here, so yeh I'm really grateful for that"*
> – Nayla, Syria

Children

Many survivors also spoke about their children when asked what keeps them going and gives them hope for the future. Their kids both helped them cope with the violence that they were experiencing, and motivated them to build a better life and future. Both of these notions are illustrated in the quotes below.

> *"I dream for my kids to prosper in this country and take the good things out of it"*
> – Lamees, Syria

Concluding Remarks

This evidence presented in this working paper illustrates the various types of violence, range of perpetrators, and different contexts within which SGBV is perpetrated against forced migrants. In particular, this research demonstrates that violence features across all phases of refugee journeys and that the harms of different types of violence are inter-connected and cumulative. For example, interviewees spoke about how expectations around marital norms and stigma around divorce (forms of gendered symbolic violence) prevented them from disclosing their experiences of intimate partner violence and subsequently seeking help. Similarly, interviewees spoke about the lack of state support mechanisms, appropriate housing options, and employment opportunities (forms of structural violence) for forced migrant women leaving violent relationships. Specifically, this research highlighted examples of violent dependency in which survivors of SGBV are forced to rely on perpetrators of violence (whether they are individual or institutional) which not only hinders their recovery and integration but actively causes further harm. In terms of policy and practice, this working paper demonstrates the importance of taking a holistic approach in addressing SGBV that takes into account the diversity of individual experiences, as well as the diverse forms of gendered violence of which forced migrants are at risk across their journeys and into resettlement.

This research also highlights the resourcefulness and coping mechanisms that have been utilised by forced migrant survivors of SGBV. These resilience factors were developed due to experiences and hardships that are preventable and that no one should have to endure. It is important that service providers, policy makers, governments, and the public are aware of the preventable nature of the harm being caused against forced migrants and pursuing individual and collective efforts to address this harm.

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