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Mental Health Impact Of Forced Marriages

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MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT OF FORCED MARRIAGES

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Hollins University, 2016
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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This **dissertation**, submitted by Neha S. Batool in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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Title Mental Health Impact of Forced Marriages
Department College of Education and Human Development
Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Neha S. Batool
05-21-2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLESvii

ABSTRACTviii

INTRODUCTION 1

LITERATURE REVIEW 4

 Theoretical Framework 6

 Rationale and Purpose of the Present Study 7

METHODOLOGY8

 Participants9

 Participant Recruitment and Selection Process10

 Data Collection and Transcription11

 Data Analysis Procedures.....12

 Methodological Integrity14

 Researchers16

 Statement of Positionality.....17

RESULTS.....19

 Experiences Prior to the Forced Marriage10

 Superordinate Theme 1: Violent Homes and Longing for Love19

 Superordinate Theme 2: Taming Young Hearts: Gender Socialization and Emerging
 Identities.....23

 Superordinate Theme 3: Fighting a Losing Battle: an Interplay of Awareness, Endurance,
 and Hope.....27

 Experiences During the Forced Marriage31

 Superordinate Theme 1: Handed over: Turning Daughters into Wives and

Mothers.....	31
Superordinate Theme 2: Battling for the Second Wind: Self-preservation, Courage, and Perseverance	34
Superordinate Theme 3: Parting Clouds: the Path to Freedom	39
Experiences After the Forced Marriage	43
Superordinate Theme 1: Attending to the Wounds: a Bittersweet Journey	43
Superordinate Theme 2: Silenced no more: Transforming Pain into Purpose	45
DISCUSSION.....	48
Outcome of Research Inquiries	49
Research Outcome, Question 1	49
Research Outcome, Question 2.....	50
Implications.....	54
Theoretical Implications.....	54
Clinical Implications	56
Policy Change Recommendations.....	58
Limitations and Future Research.....	60
REFERENCES	63

LIST OF TABLES

Tables	Page
1. Participant demographics	9
2. Religious affiliation	9
3. Socioeconomic status	10
4. Education history	10
5. Summary of superordinate and sub themes related to experiences prior to, during, and after the forced marriage.....	18
6. Participants' childhood experiences	21
7. Participants' parents' challenges	21

ABSTRACT

To address the mental health impact of forced marriages in the United States, this study examined the lived experiences of nine women who were forced to marry between the ages of 10 and 25. Semi structured interviews, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and Feminist Standpoint theory were utilized to explore their experiences prior to, during, and after their forced marriage, with a particular focus on their psychological wellbeing, coping mechanisms, help seeking behaviors, barriers, and needs. A total of eight superordinate themes emerged that highlighted the role of gender socialization, intergenerational violence and trauma, and adverse childhood experiences in forced marriages, all of which led to lifelong mental health challenges and consequences. Participants described the impact of violence on their identity development, attachment styles and interpersonal relationships. They reported internal and external barriers that led to their forced marriage and prolonged their stay in the marriage and emphasized a need for short-and long-term resources, including social support and economic stability. Their coping styles reflected appraisal-focused, emotion focused, and adaptive behavioral strategies. Results highlight the importance of further examining the role of systemic patriarchal structures that maintain status of privilege and oppression. Findings also reflect the importance of social justice framework in psychological interventions to prevent marginalization, stigma, and pathology and to increase help seeking behaviors, empowerment, and resiliency for this underserved community.

Keywords: forced marriages, child marriages, mental health, trauma, violence against Women (VAW), adverse childhood experiences, gender socialization/grooming.

Mental Health Impact of Forced Marriages

Introduction

Forced marriages occur without free and full consent of at least one of the partners and often involve the use of physical, sexual, psychological, and financial duress (Tahirih Justice Center, 2011, 2016; Swegman, 2016). The absence of free and full consent may be due to the lack of perceived choice to select whether, when, or whom to marry, or to express such decisions without experiencing negative consequences. Additionally, forced marriages may result from incapability to give informed consent due to incapacity, disability or of being under the legal age of consent, also referred to as child marriages. Although forced marriages are not limited to a particular religion, race, ethnicity, or gender, it has been conceptualized as a form of violence against women since majority of the individuals experiencing victimization are women and girls under the age of 18 (Tahirih Justice Center, 2011).

Cases of forced marriages remain underexamined despite evidence of it being a significant problem in the United States. In a national survey of 500 agencies providing services to immigrant communities in the U.S., the Tahirih Justice Center (2011) found approximately 3000 cases of known and suspected forced marriages within a two-year period, 2009-2011. Of all the service providers, 67 percent indicated that forced marriage was underreported and numbers might be higher than 3000 cases. Sri & Raja (2013) administered 524 questionnaires to students, domestic violence professionals, and refugee service providers between 2011 and 2012. One in 3 participants from the sample reported witnessing cases of forced marriage (37%), with a total of 531 suspected or confirmed cases. Majority of the sample consisted of South Asian college students (57%). Furthermore, a survey of 12 organizations serving South Asian communities indicated that over 83% of all organizations had come across a case of forced marriage in the

past five years (Roy, 2011). One of the key findings from the study was that individuals sought help for domestic violence or sexual violence, but forced marriage was not identified unless it was explicitly screened for. Another study that comprised of 24 individuals with lived forced marriage experiences and 15 professionals who came across a forced marriage case identified that women were unaware of services which impacted their help seeking behaviors and they did not conceptualize their experiences as a forced marriage (Love et al., 2019). Majority of the sample reflected South Asian participants' (79%) perspectives. Lastly, a more recent national research examining the prevalence rates of forced marriages in the United States that did not focus primarily on an immigrant community documented 752 respondents who had experienced a threat or an actual forced marriage (Esthappan, et al., 2018). Contrary to previous research, higher number of forced marriages were reported by men. Researchers reported a potential for measurement error due to this being a web-based survey.

Given the coercive nature of forced marriages, research confirms women and girls experiencing multiple forms of violence or coercion (Esthappan et al., 2018; Kopelman, 2016; Swegman, 2016; Sri & Raja, 2013; Dank et al., 2019) that may lead to the development of mental health issues (Sri & Raja, 2013; Dank et al., 2019). Minors who are forced to marry may be vulnerable to experiencing greater violence without resources to protect themselves, with an increased risk of lifetime mental health challenges to themselves and their children (McFarlane, 2016). More specifically, McFarlane (2016) noted that child marriages increase the risk for statutory rape and likelihood of lifetime sexual abuse. Regardless of the age, women who experienced a forced marriage attempt reported increased intimate partner sexual violence, somatic symptoms, and behavioral concerns of their children. Recently, Wahi et al., (2019) interviewed adults who were forced to marry as children, and they reported 18 of 21 participants

experiencing multiple forms of violence. A lack of understanding regarding marriage, pregnancy, and consent at the time of marriage was also notable. Although limited, sufficient data exists that warrants further exploration.

Over the past several years, the research trend shows greater attention to child marriages, with exploration of prevalence rates and the physical, psychological, and economic impact of marrying young. A recent study discovered a high number of child marriages taking place in the U.S. Data gathered through the state health department identified 207, 459 child marriages occurring between 2000 and 2015 (Tsui, et al., 2017). Forced marriages or the context under which these child marriages took place were not identified. Although insightful, this approach risks marginalizing individuals who are forced to marry as adults and limiting the opportunities to fully comprehend additional contextual factors beyond age that result in forced marriages. Additionally, prevalence rates of child marriages and interventions dependent on this data, without context under which they took place, can be misleading and mask crucial details necessary for creating effective and multiculturally appropriate strategies to support individuals of any age.

Given the complexity of forced marriages and the sparse data primarily focused on experiences of immigrant communities, attention to detail without a focus on specific community is necessary to prevent marginalization and to fill in the existing research gaps. We must dissect patterns and seek answers directly from those impacted and the current study is a reflection of this effort as it voices women's lived experiences who were forced to marry between the ages of 10-25, representing various identities and backgrounds. Through semi-structured interviews, a particular attention was given to understanding women's psychological wellbeing across their lifespan with contextual factors that resulted in said experiences. All women had left their forced

marriages at the time of the interview, offering a holistic perspective of circumstances prior to, during, and after their forced marriage. The purpose of this investigation was to highlight mental health challenges women experienced as a result of encountering various dynamics throughout their lives associated with forced marriages and their journey toward healing.

Literature Review

Only a handful of empirical research exists examining women's experiences with forced marriages in the United States, with selective samples. The Tahirih (2011) survey with community service providers identified women experiencing family pressures to marry, such as the expectation to respect an arrangement between families, being told what was in their best interest, or the pressure to maintain family's honor against something that might have soiled the family's reputation (e.g. pregnancy before marriage or sexual identity). Service providers described their clients experiencing various forms of violence, including emotional blackmail, isolation, and threats related to one's life, physical violence, financial restrictions, and immigration status. Although insightful, this survey gathered data specific to immigrants' experiences and may not be fully representative of non-immigrant individuals' experiences in the United States.

Similarly, an ethnographic study explored experiences of African immigrant women through focus groups in New York (Yetu, 2012). This study identified family pressures contributing to forced marriages as well. Participants described the practice as a "cultural tradition" that they could not change and as a "rite of passage" which would lead them to more privileges after marriages (p.14). Refusal to give in to these pressures could mean increased life restrictions such as discontinuation of education. The sample however, only included immigrant participants who had recently married or were soon expected to be married. Another study that

focused mainly on an immigrant community explored experiences of MENASA migrants with familial conflicts related to marital choice (Marcus, 2016). Marcus (2016) broadly discussed and identified marital conflicts in families, including arrange marriages, but did not directly ask about forced marriages. They also engaged in ethnic profiling by reaching out to individuals who appeared to be from the MENASA communities. Additionally, Sri & Raja (2013) administered 524 questionnaires to professional and students at forced marriages trainings and workshops, with follow up interviews of professional who had previously worked with cases of forced marriages. Findings identified violence and abuse in forced marriages and its consequences, including emotional, physical, sexual, financial, and domestic abuse, depression, completed or attempted suicide, alcohol dependence, and substance abuse.

Furthermore, in one study that did not only focus on immigrant community, Dank (2013), utilized qualitative interviews to examine South Asian women's perspectives, with eventually including participants from any backgrounds when the sample did not meet the study requirements. They found pressures related to family, culture, immigration status, religion, increasing age, and 'westernization' as potential reasons for forced marriages (p.7). Participants explained that pressure to marry someone would result from their family's refusal in accepting the partner of their choice. The findings also revealed participants' experiences with emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as forced labor. The impact of such experiences was described as difficulty trusting others, feeling ashamed, alone, or not being understood. Participants also reported difficulty functioning in the society as a result of mental health challenges, which impacted their life goals such as continuing their education. Moreover, interviews with service providers and stakeholders revealed a lack of working definition of forced marriage and training, impacting provision of services.

Although research has reported significant impact of forced marriages, no research was discovered in the field of clinical or counseling psychology. While there is evidence of multiple forms of violence and its psychological influences, a more in-depth understanding is necessary to further highlight the underlying mechanism that lead to forced marriages and to contextualize the mental health challenges on a systemic level instead of focusing on specific cultural or religious communities, which may increase stigma and marginalization and exclude cases where culture or religion may not be a factor.

Theoretical Conceptualization

Due to strict gender roles imposed upon women and the serious consequences of forced marriage, Feminist Standpoint theory provides significant theoretical relevance in the present study. Feminist Standpoint accounts for influences related to social inequities, power, privilege, and oppression in women's experiences with violence (Kokushkin, 2014). Harding (1997) discusses that women's outlook on reality is systematically different from men's privileged reality and multiple standpoints exist based on people's experiences specific to their social location. While there is no one form of truth, Harding (1997) claims that the perspectives of the privileged group dominate social structures and negatively influence marginalized individuals. Therefore, Feminist Standpoint attempts to decentralize dominant androcentric knowledge and centralize alternative forms of knowledge that better capture the reality of those in disadvantaged positions. Furthermore, Allen & Baber (1992) advocate for identifying marginalized groups and engaging them in research for critical social analysis. Given the limited understanding of forced marriages and their consequences for women, it is crucial to gather more information through the lens of systemic social structures and intersecting identities to look beyond family and

community level influences that can be addressed to create social change and better understand women's mental health.

Rationale and purpose of this study

Research shows that agencies lack a working definition of forced marriages as well as assessment and screening tools to identify forced marriages and needs, which leads to limited resources and services (Tahirih, 2011; Love et al., 2018; Dank, et al., 2017; Sri & Raja, 2013). Majority of the data stems from work with immigrant communities and lacks clarification and context regarding underlying mechanisms. Although research has identified mental health challenges and psychopathology as a result of forced marriages (Dank, et al., 2017; Sri & Raja, 2013; McFarlane, 2016), it is yet to be acknowledged and discussed that people experience and relate to such circumstances differently based on the context, thus leading to various types of coping mechanisms, help seeking behaviors, and cognitive framework. Furthermore, research has emphasized experiences before and after the forced marriages, but understanding related to the healing process after individuals have left the forced marriage remains underexamined. Therefore, a thorough exploration of how women make meaning of their experiences throughout their lives is crucial to guiding provision of effective mental health services.

Specific to this research is the focus on the developmental trajectory of how women experienced their lives prior to, during, and after the forced marriage, providing an in-depth examination of factors impacting their psychological wellbeing at various levels, with the effects on their development into adulthood and lifelong challenges they still experience after having left their forced marriage. Findings from an interpretive phenomenological analysis will offer increased insight into short-term and long-term mental health difficulties with an emphasis on identity development, attachment styles and interpersonal relationships, manifestations of

trauma, coping mechanisms, help seeking behaviors, and intergenerational influence. An overview of their entire lifespan may also help identify loopholes in our system that can be corrected to intervene earlier to prevent forced marriages and offer common language to help communities, survivors, and service providers identify forced marriages, as to some it may appear an occurrence of interpersonal violence resulting in failure to identify crucial details. The following two primary research questions will guide this process: 1) what are the lived experiences of women who have been forced into a marriage, and 2) how does the experience with forced marriage impact their psychological well-being?

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used for this study, as it allowed for an in depth understanding of participant's experiences. Unlike quantitative approaches, which tend to answer "why" questions, qualitative analysis is most appropriate for answering "how" or "what" questions (Morrow, 2005). Likewise, quantitative approaches test theories and relationship between variables, whereas, qualitative approaches allow for an examination of participants' personal accounts of their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p.14). This approach was particularly helpful with not just understanding what participants experienced, but how it influenced their lives and how they interpreted and made sense of their experiences. Additionally, a qualitative approach is beneficial in gathering in-depth data if there is a research area that has not already been explored or if there is lack of clarity in the existing data (Morrow, 2005). Given that there is limited research regarding mental health impact of forced marriages, this approach was considered to be most effective in understanding how women experience a forced marriage and its affects, particularly as they relate to their mental health.

Participants

Nine women volunteered to participate in the study and all interviews were included in the analysis. Participants ages ranged between 22-48, with an average age of 37 years. All participants were forced to marry between the ages of 10-25, at an average age of 16 years. At the time of leaving their forced marriage, participants' average age was 26 and they had spent an average of 10 years in their forced marriage. Eight participants identified as heterosexual and one identified as bisexual. All participants reported being employed and two identified as students. All participants had children except one. Participant's socioeconomic status ranged from lower middle class to upper middle class. Six participants were married or in a domestic partnership at the time of the interview. Five participants identified as multiracial and four identified as White.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Demographics	Age Range
Current age	20s-40s
Age at the time of FM	13-19
Age when left the FM	16-40
Time spent in the FM	2-20
Time since leaving the FM	3-30

Table 2. Religious Affiliation

Before the FM	Participants	After the FM	Participants
Islam	N = 3	Islam	N = 3
Christianity	N = 2	Christianity	N = 2
Ultra-orthodox Judaism	N = 1	Buddhism	N = 1
Cult affiliation	N = 1	Atheism	N = 1
No affiliation/Unknown	N = 2	No affiliation/Unknown	N = 2

Table 3. Socioeconomic Status

Before the FM	Participants	After the FM	Participants
Lower/Lower middle Class	N = 5	Lower/Lower middle Class	N = 1
Middle Class	N = 1	Middle Class	N = 2
Upper Middle Class	N = 2	Upper Middle Class	N = 5
Unknown	N = 1	Unknown	N = 1

*One participant reported change from upper to lower class as a result of parent's physical disability and mental health concerns

*One participant reported class status transitioning from upper class to lower class after parents immigrated to the U.S.

Table 4. Education History

Education	Participants
Formal education before FM	N = 2
Home schooling with emphasis on religious teachings	N = 2
Infrequent opportunities – moving/inconsistent enrollment	N = 5
Stopped education before/for FM	N = 9
Started/continued education during FM	N = 4
*2 needed husband's signature to begin	
Continued/started education after FM	N = 9
*High school diploma/GED	N = 4
*Higher education	N = 5

Participants Recruitment and Selection Process

Upon receiving IRB approval, purposive sampling and snowballing sampling methods were utilized to recruit participants from August 2019 to November 2019. An advertisement for the study was posted on Facebook and reddit. *The Tahirih Justice Center* also recruited participants from their clientele network by emailing the study advertisement to their current and former clients as well as survivor advocates.

The study's advertisement consisted of a brief overview of the study, eligibility criteria with expected time commitment, compensation information (i.e., a \$25 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview process), and a Qualtrics link to provide their contact information. The advertisement also stated that participants could choose to invite an advocate as a form of support during their interview. The recruitment process ended once the data reached saturation, after nine participants. To maintain homogeneity in the sample, women who had experienced a

forced marriage in the United States between the ages of 10 and 25 years were recruited.

Additional inclusion criteria required that by the time of the interview, women must be over the age of 18, have left the forced marriage, and be residing in the United States.

Data Collection and Transcription

Once participants completed the initial Qualtrics survey (posted on the advertisement) and provided their contact information, they were sent another Qualtrics survey link to review informed consent form and provide demographic information as well as their availability for an interview. Once a time was finalized through email, the principal researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews guided by the interview protocol, which was finalized after being reviewed by the dissertation committee and an expert who works directly with forced marriage clients. Additionally, two pilot interviews were conducted prior to official data collection for practice with two students at the University of North Dakota who did not meet the study criteria (due to potential limited number of participants). The interview protocol was divided into three sections (experiences prior to the forced marriage, experiences during the forced marriage, and experiences after the forced marriage). Follow up and open-ended questions were asked to fully explore the phenomena if necessary. All participants were interviewed once or twice. A second interview was scheduled if the participants offered more in-depth information and were unable to complete the interview. The interview times for each participant varied with an average of 150 minutes. Interviews took place using teleconferencing services (phone & zoom) from researcher's home and participants' place of choice. All interviews were recorded in zoom.

After data collection, interviews were transcribed through *Temi*, an encrypted advance speech recognition software. Data collection was completed within four months and participants were compensated for their contribution after their final interview. To maintain confidentiality,

no identified information for participants was included on the electronic files or the interview protocol. All files were in a password protected computer and under password protected files. Names of participants were substituted with pseudonyms prior to providing access to the readers and the auditor. Pseudonyms were left out of the results write up to maintain confidentiality given that five of the eight participants are advocates and their stories can be located online.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze and interpret the data. IPA is an experiential and psychological approach developed from a combination of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology began as a philosophical movement, also considered a ‘rigorous science’ founded by Edmund Husserl and further developed by others, such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean Paul Sartre (Langdrige, 2007). IPA is consistent with their ideas of understanding people’s experiences and world views in relationship to their social context, language and culture, and other forms of engagement with the world. This approach allowed the researcher to explore various contextual factors that contributed to participants’ experiences such as family history of intergenerational trauma, adverse childhood experiences, social support, social location, and family and community values.

Hermeneutics, as a theory of interpretation, provides a theoretical basis for IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Martin Heidegger claimed that although there are visible meanings for things, there can also be hidden or disguised meanings, which we always access through interpretation, symbolic interactionism, and creation of meaning within the social context through interactions with others. IPA also consists of double hermeneutics (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Not only are the participants making sense of their experiences, but the researcher is also

trying to make sense of the participants telling their stories. This process leads to additional meaning and knowledge given the researcher's perspectives and prolonged engagement with the data. This aspect of IPA was fruitful to the researcher in providing the flexibility to explore meanings in the data that were not apparent such as introducing psychological constructs related to identity development process and attachment styles.

Lastly, a third component of IPA, idiography, emphasizes focus on the particular (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The particular shows in IPA through commitment to detail and depth of analysis as well as understanding how a phenomenon has been understood/perceived by a particular person, which is evidenced through purposive sampling and detailed data gathering. Although IPA engages in the process of generalization within the group of participants, they are embedded in the particular experiences of particular participants. This is evidenced in utilization of quotes from each participant to support the themes.

Shinebourne (2011) and Smith & Osborn (2003) describe the following stages that were used as a guide during the process of analysis. During the initial stage of analysis, the researcher began with the first transcript by reviewing it a few times to familiarize herself with the content and then listed any initial reflections, thoughts and reactions. In remaining congruent with the feminist standpoint lens, researcher paid close attention to how the language of the transcript portrayed power dynamics and how women perceived their experiences within various relationships in their lives. For example, most participants did not realize that had a choice in agreeing or disagreeing with the marriage proposal which was directly influenced by how they had been socialized as girls.

The second stage of analysis consisted of reviewing the entire transcript again and transforming the initial content of transcript into sub themes. Primary emphasis was placed on

concisely capturing the main idea that contributed to conceptual understanding of the transcript while maintaining the language. During the third stage, sub themes were clustered together based on their conceptual similarities, called superordinate themes. The final stage requires going through the four stages above for each of the transcripts and merging a comprehensive table of final themes from all the transcripts. The clusters from each transcript are also rearranged with the new comprehensive list of themes, the main findings. Findings were separated into participants' experiences prior, during, and after their forced marriage.

Methodological Integrity

Multiple strategies were utilized to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. Particularly, similar to standards of quantitative research, an emphasis is placed on establishing credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Morrow, 2005). As recommended in Morrow (2005), credibility was determined through researcher reflexivity, member checks, thick description, data saturation and working with a team of 3 members for auditing and providing feedback on the analysis.

Researcher reflexivity is encouraged to think critically about the process of research, acknowledge research bias, and challenge assumptions that may impact the interpretation (Mason, 2002). This is done by deep introspection with emphasis on both self and the other in order to expand the data (Crotty, 2016). Principle investigator engaged in this process before and after each interview regarding initial assumptions, thoughts, reactions, further areas to explore, or any confusion. This process continued through data analysis and the primary investigator also reflected on the decision-making process for finalizing the themes and the choice of language for themes. This process is also utilized to establish transferability in that it offers insights about the researcher as an instrument (Morrow, 2005), researcher's relationship with the data, and how it

may impact the interpretation process. Below, the primary investigator has provided information related to team member's ethnic backgrounds, intentionality with selecting team members, and a statement of positionality that reflects experiences and beliefs to help readers determine how findings may transfer. Additionally, the small sample of this study offered in-depth insight into participants' lives. Eight of the nine participants had mentoring experiences with other women who also had experienced a forced marriage or were at risk, which also contributes to the richness of participants' perspectives.

Due to the length and complexity of the data, member checking was completed by sending each participant a summary of results and feedback was requested specific to how well their experiences were represented in the findings. They were encouraged to provide any other feedback as well. Three participants responded and expressed approval. Given the emphasis on contextualizing participant's experiences, detailed interviews were completed with follow up clarification questions as needed, leading to thick descriptions (Morrow, 2005). Additionally, saturation determined when primary investigator had sufficient data. Saturation takes places when additional data is no longer producing new codes (Urquhart, 2013).

A team of 2 readers and an auditor (also the committee chair), was created to do quality check of the primary investigator's analysis. Both readers were given three transcripts for a comprehensive review and met with the primary researcher to review the final findings. The auditor received the same three transcripts as well as the final findings, which reflected the feedback of all reviews. The auditor also worked closely with designing the methodology, creating the interview protocol, and finalizing the interview procedures. All team members had prior experience with various qualitative analysis. Team members were familiarized with IPA approach prior to the analysis stage. As Rodham (2015) suggested, team

members were encouraged to take a curious stance during the interpretation process rather than focusing on preconceived notions of the topic. The team was encouraged to engage in self-reflection and explore values and belief systems within the context of participants' identities and stories that may influence their perspectives as they review and provide feedback on the analysis (Levitt, et al.2018).

Confirmability of this research is reflected in the decision to utilize semi-structured interviews to prevent leading questions, reduce bias, and to ask open ended questions that allow the participants to guide what story they tell (Houshmand et al., 2014). Furthermore, audit trails were created to monitor the process of analysis. This is to ensure that IPA steps were followed carefully and can be traced back as needed (Morrow, 2005). This process reflects dependability as well given a structured analytical process that can be followed and repeated (Morrow, 2005). It provides a chronological and detailed process including data collection, as well as creation of the superordinate and subthemes.

Researchers

Research team members included the primary investigator's academic advisor and dissertation committee chair, Dr. Rachel Navarro who identifies as a Latina Woman, a fellow graduate student, Ayli Carrero Pinedo who identifies as an immigrant and a Latina Woman, and another colleague Maya Adelman Cabral, who identifies as a White Woman. Primary investigator identified graduate research team members who were experienced with qualitative research, were well-versed in multiculturalism, and shared an interest in working with marginalized communities. Given that most of the research about forced marriages have been with immigrant communities and the ambiguity related to potential participants' identities for this study, primary investigator intentionally selected a team member who identified as an

immigrant and another without an immigration background. This was to ensure representation and inclusion of a variety of perspectives in analyzing the data. Overall, the team represented variable professional experiences to ensure that the primary researcher's analytical approach could be challenged as a means of quality control.

Statement of Positionality

The primary investigator is a naturalized citizen who immigrated from South Asia as an adolescent. The primary investigator was born and raised in a family and community that practices arranged marriages, but the line between arranged and forced marriage is often crossed. The primary investigator's initial interest in forced marriage research emerged after an experience with preventing her own forced marriage with the support of the Tahirih Justice Center. Ultimately, evidence of lack of awareness in academia and neglect of attention to this issue in mental health services influenced the primary investigator's decision to begin this research. The primary investigator initially believed forced marriages to be a concern in mostly immigrant communities due to religious and cultural factors, however, these beliefs have been challenged and shifted over the past few years since the beginning of this project. Factors that have influenced this include a thorough and consistent review of the literature, findings of this research, as well as continued family conversations with an enhanced understanding of their beliefs, values, and motives related to the practice of forced marriages. The primary investigator distinguishes between arranged and forced marriages, believes that personal and social identities as well as social location contributes to the practice of forced marriages, and that fear of loss of these identities is one of the core components that perpetuate violence and the misuse of power.

Results

Table 5. Summary of superordinate and sub themes related to experiences prior to, during, and after the forced marriage.

Time of experience	Superordinate Themes	Sub Themes
Before the forced marriage	Violent homes and longing for love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Festering family wounds and consequences b. Neglected daughters: fulfilling the voids in their heart
	Taming young hearts: gender socialization and emerging identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Grooming and the self-fulfilling prophecy b. Stripped of power, voice, and choice
	Fighting a losing battle: an interplay of awareness, endurance, and hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Caged: the longing for freedom and survival b. Between a rock and a hard place
During the forced marriage	Handed over: turning daughters into wives and mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Chained: the silent, obedient, servant wife b. Worn out: “why don’t I feel like I love?”
	Battling for the second wind: self-preservation, courage, and perseverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A spark of resiliency in compromise and adaptation b. Weathering the storm c. Nowhere to go: the search for a lifeline
	Parting clouds: the path to freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The Awakening b. Breaking through the cage
After the forced marriage	Attending to the wounds: a bittersweet journey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Living the trauma and mourning the losses b. Healing and reclaiming the self
	Silenced no more: transforming pain into purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Roaring back b. Rebuilding the nest c. Liberation: women empowering women

Note. $N = 9$

Experiences prior to the forced marriage

Violent Homes and Longing for Love

This theme captures participants' experiences in their environment, with family and community relationships, and their understanding of the interpersonal family dynamics that negatively impacted their psychological wellbeing. Some participants' families lacked resources to provide physical and emotional safety and nurturing for themselves and for participants, reflecting intergenerational challenges. This led to missed opportunities for most participants to learn to effectively connect with others and to establish a sense of self-efficacy and worthiness, independent of a need for acceptance and approval from others. Individual, familial, community, and environmental factors that contributed to such experiences are highlighted. The two subthemes discussed here are 1) Festering family wounds and consequences and 2) Neglected daughters: fulfilling the voids in their hearts.

Festering Family Wounds and Consequences

Prior to the forced marriage, most participants described their upbringing as unstable and chaotic. They recalled a significant part of their childhood witnessing and/or experiencing various forms of violence in their families, including physical, sexual, emotional verbal, or spiritual abuse, leading to a lack of physical and psychological safety. These experiences were attributed to multiple factors including, but limited to, a history of forced marriages and other forms of violence in the family, parents' divorce or separation and the consequential circumstances (e.g, housing instability), and/or family members struggling with their own mental health and ineffective coping styles (e.g., unhealthy romantic relationships and substance abuse). Overall, their experiences reflect the presence of intergenerational violence and trauma that significantly impacted these participants' childhoods.

The following excerpts illustrate the family circumstances that were harmful for some participants. Describing the chaotic upbringing and the lack of guidance and safety in her life, this participant shared that after her parents' separation, her "father [became] extremely abusive" and her mother, who was forced to marry her father, "was drinking a lot and I think she just was really a mess because of her kids being taken away." She said she and her brother often hid from their parents or stayed silent to protect themselves from emotional and physical abuse. Another participant reported being sexually abused as a child by their landlord and ignored by her mother after reaching out for help. She stated that, "he [landlord] just kept having unlimited access to me as much as he wanted to; I am pretty sure that I was the one paying rent on that household." When asked to discuss factors that might have contributed to this experience, she said, "I think she [mother] probably was bipolar" and "as a young adult, I know she was raped at time." These examples capture parents' challenges in taking care of themselves and the participants. There is also evidence of absence of power, predictability, protection, and normalization of violence.

Experiences such as those described above point to the festering family wounds that were not effectively managed, addressed, or healed. Indeed, none of the participants in the study reported their family members seeking long-term mental health services. One participant described mental health stigma in her community and said that "any sort of mental illness would not be treated or diagnosed or acknowledged, so she [mother] was just left to struggle with all that." Potentially, lack of resources and parents' ineffective attempts to cope with their own pain compromised most of participants' safety, leading to intergenerational violence and trauma. This cycle of violence might also represent family members' attempts to experience control and power to compensate for their vulnerability underneath the violent protective behaviors toward their children. Additionally, these patterns may have deprived participants of learning healthier coping

mechanisms since so much of their energy was spent surviving, resulting in their own struggle to break through the cycle.

Table 6. Participants' Childhood Experiences

Family dynamics	Participants
Raised by biological parents together	N = 4
Raised by biological parent and stepparent together	N = 3
Raised by single biological Parent – divorce or incarceration	N = 2
*Foster care or relative involvement	N = 2
*Frequent moving (Financial reasons, relationships, separation, etc)	N = 5
Mother forced to marry father	N = 2
Family member/relative forced to marry	N = 4
Community Influence related to forced marriage	N = 6

Table 7. Participants' Parents' Challenges

Factors influencing parenting abilities	Participants
Substance abuse	N = 3
Mental Health Difficulties	N = 5
Financial concerns	N = 3
Abusive marriages	N = 6

Neglected Daughters: Fulfilling the Voids in their Hearts

From their interviews, it was clear that all participants' mental health was negatively impacted as a result of the lack of support and inattentiveness of caregivers to meet their needs. Majority of the participants particularly voiced a lack of emotional nurturing from their primary caregivers, which was reported as traumatic. They also experienced a lack of belonging and purpose. This left them vulnerable to future harm in other relationships, given they never experienced a healthy bond with their primary caregivers and were longing for affection and belonging.

In general, most of the participants described their family and community culture as emotionally reserved and reported limited opportunities to establish authentic friendships or to experience trusting relationships within the family or in the community. When describing family relationships, one participant said, "I love my family, but sometimes it just feels so surface

because we weren't able to talk about the hard things to talk about. The hard things got us in trouble.” She added, “overall issues personal issues, feelings, emotions, were all very much shoved under a rug.” She also described “superficial” social relationships where “reputation” and “perfection” were emphasized. For many participants, the culture of inauthenticity and the importance of social representation seemed to have been at the expense of creating a holding space for emotional experiences and communicating safety and connection. Although participants perceived there to be love in the family, there was also the absence of opportunity to truly express themselves. Furthermore, there was an emphasis on community identity as well that needed to be maintained through “perfection,” at the cost of their own wellbeing.

When asked to recall their emotional experiences as children, prior to there being any indication of a plan for forced marriage, all participants shared a variety of emotional states, including feeling unsafe, afraid, isolated, neglected, unwanted, unloved, empty, and worthless. One participant shared that, “I felt very neglected; I felt like I should just vanish. I really felt like I did not belong there [home]; I wanted to do everything that they were against, but I could not do that [...] because I was afraid that my dad would hit me.” This example reflects many participants’ strong desire to express themselves and to belong, but fear and external circumstances preventing that. Their overall experiences represent feeling stuck and powerless in an environment that is expected to be safe, nurturing, and loving.

Experience of emotional neglect and a sense of emptiness led to lifelong consequences, as characterized by the following participant. She stated, “I had a void in my heart; I remember constantly really wanting his (father) love and approval.” Later in her story, she mentioned, “I married a lot for his approval because anytime I would get engaged and then get married, I remember like, see dad? Look, I am doing it right. I am doing it right dad, look at me. I needed

the approval. I was constantly seeking his approval in my adult life.” This illustrates the potential impact of parents’ inability to provide emotional nurturing to participants as a result of their own mental health struggles and/or previously learned behaviors from their own upbringing. It also represents the depth of impact, with participants’ continuous search for fulfillment in their adult lives characterized by acceptance and love that they did not feel from their families.

These examples reflect the wounds that were created through emotional neglect and the life-long dire consequences when they continued to engage in ineffective bids for connection, resulting in a spiral of abusive relationships throughout their lives and internalizing the sense of worthlessness if not perfect or wanted. There is a possibility that participants’ perspective of what love is or how it is expressed might have been compromised, also increasing their vulnerability to others taking advantage of them.

Taming Young Hearts: Gender Socialization and Emerging Identities

This theme reflects families’ cultural and religious expectations of most of the participants as young girls and the consequences they faced for not upholding these norms. It reflects the patriarchal structures as well as internalized oppression and its impact on identity development. Some participants who were raised within a strong religious community or a cult described their religion as an “extremely patriarchal and misogynistic” contributor to their forced marriage, whereas others shared that while their religion did not condone violence, it was used as an excuse to uphold cultural expectations. Participants’ unique challenges in exploring their identities in restrictive environments with little to no autonomy also are discussed. The following are two sub-themes that emerged, as follows: 1) grooming and the self-fulfilling prophecy and 2) stripped of power, voice, and choice

Grooming and the Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Most participants described gender socialization and cultural and/or religious influences on their upbringing in preparation for them to be “trained” as wives and mothers. Gender roles were scripted and connected to expectations of how participants were meant to live as girls and women in order to maintain honor in their families. Some participants experienced limitations regarding how they could behave or express themselves. For example, tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and adherence to the rules were encouraged, praised, and role modeled by their mothers. On the other hand, formal education, dating, and questioning the rules were the most common restrictions experienced. Indeed, some participants were taken out of school at the time of the forced marriage, education stopped if they were being homeschooled, or they were not enrolled in school to begin with.

Grooming and role modeling that led to one participant’s forced marriage is reflected in the following example. She shared that, based on the “gender roles that were modeled to her, she was supposed to be a wife and a mom; she was not really supposed to want to have a career.” When boys started talking to her at school, her mother told her father and he said, “sex outside of marriage is [not permitted] and you are going to get married.” This participant and others expressed interest in continuing education and exploring career options but were unable to do so, which often led to them feeling confused, helpless, and stuck.

There was also evidence of participants internalizing these restrictive gender role expectations as part of their personal identities. Such internalized gender role experiences could be seen in their thought processes (e.g., ideas about how they *needed* to be) and behaviors (e.g, what they *needed* to do). Furthermore, the participants’ sense of worthiness was measured against how perfect and submissive they were in upholding the expected gender role norms. This

is captured in one participant's experience who grew up with the expectation to be "flawless" as a means of honoring her parents. She added that prior to being forced to marry, she hoped she can be worthy and believed she needed to change many things about herself to be the perfect daughter for her family. For many participants, the repercussions for resisting these norms were social shaming and ostracization, which carried a sense of not belonging and being labeled as rebellious. The persona of being "the good girl" who obliged and "the bad girl" who rebelled was very evident resulting in identity struggles for some. In the end, many participants described wanting to be authentic but being too afraid and instead doing what they thought would help them be more acceptable.

It is also notable that tolerance of patriarchal norms occurred within the family system, where mothers were lacking power and were living according to the gender norms without questioning. If they did question, they were dismissed. This is evident by one participant's mother who reportedly referred to herself as a "slave" or a "maid" when she was not included in a decision-making process. The power dynamics remained unchallenged in their families and were expected to be upheld when participants married, highlighting the potential impact of internalized oppression in forced marriages and its intergenerational effects.

Although gender socialization in the name of culture or religion was not explicitly practiced by some families, the misuse of power in interpersonal relationships was evident. It is possible that religious beliefs offer a more tangible way to uphold the expectations that mask the power structures that are truly at the core of the patriarchal system. Therefore, holding specific religious beliefs accountable for violence rather than attending to the underlying mechanisms of power can not only result in increasing stigma of particular communities, but also lead to creating ineffective interventions.

Stripped of Power, Voice, and Choice

This theme is reflective of how participants lacked autonomy in their lives and the factors that contributed to this above and beyond gender socialization. Indeed, most participants reported that they were never included in conversations with their family prior to a man being chosen for them. This was irrespective of reasons for the forced marriage. The absence of opportunities to practice autonomy and authenticity led to the majority of participants not recognizing the lack of trust, respect, and love from their caregivers, therefore, often not questioning or speaking up for themselves. Fear of increased violence as well as being disconnected from their bodies and the reality of forced marriage also kept them silent.

The excessive use of force and grooming seems to imply the families' close attachment to cultural/religious values, with disregard to their daughters' wellbeing. One participant was kidnapped and taken out of the country because she was suspected to have been dating. Her father said that "I can't believe you're becoming a bad girl. I'm having you stay. I'm leaving you here because I want you to learn the culture. I want you to learn the importance of who you are, whose daughter you are, where you come from." Families' lack of control in influencing their daughters' future or harm to their reputation or community identity could have influenced their violent behaviors, including forced marriages. They may also have experienced threats to their standards being upheld given the participants choose not to represent them.

Participants who attempted to express their desires were ignored or punished when they challenged their families regarding cultural/religious norms in general or regarding practices specific to marriage. When one participant questioned her family's decision, her grandfather said she needed a spanking and she said, "she was getting spanked and yet in a few nights she could go have sex with a guy and get pregnant." She added that, "if I knew back then what I know

today, I would have looked at them all and said fuck you and walked out of that wedding. But I didn't because my big thing was what will everyone think of me." The persona of the "good girl" and "bad girl" continued to immense subtle pressures. It seems that participants were silenced not just overtly by use of violence, but also through implied threats and fear.

Consequently, these experiences led to lifelong emotional turmoil as participants struggled to develop identities independent of their family and community expectations. Without an understanding of what was missing in their lives, participants reported entering unhealthy romantic relationships after their forced marriage to meet their emotional needs. With being taught to ignore the pain blurred their boundaries and lowered the expectations of how they should be treated as well as the lack of awareness of how they should reciprocate.

Fighting a Losing Battle: an Interplay of Awareness, Endurance, and Hope

Participants experienced emotional turmoil and its psychological impact as a consequence of their reported lack of autonomy, control and choices in the decision-making process of their marriage. At the same time, participants' stories signify the role of coping skills and resiliency that served as protective factors for them while navigating these psychological stressors. All participants experienced the phenomenon of forced marriage differently, which depended on the context of their upbringing. It influenced their perspectives through which they struggled to make sense of what was being done to them. This theme reflects that struggle, with two subthemes merging, namely: 1) caged: the longing for freedom and survival and 2) between a rock and a hard place.

Caged: the Longing for Freedom and Survival

For some participants, once the forced marriage was decided, there was a sense of knowing in their heart that their lives were meant to be more than becoming wives and mothers,

but they lacked power to change their circumstances. Among other feelings, emotional turmoil was characterized by experiencing anger, pressure, fear, doubt, insecurity and confusion. Participants expressed a sense of betrayal and loss of their childhood and their dreams. Some described a strong desire for freedom, with feeling trapped and hopeless while others emotionally disconnected from themselves. The sense of being wronged, thrown out, a burden, and unworthy was also notable.

Participants' internal dialogues and behaviors capture the intensity of their emotional experiences and seem to represent awareness, helplessness and an expression of longing for freedom. Many participants experienced an internal sense of "fighting" given their lack of ability to change circumstances. Some participants showed determination and hope through multiple attempts to reach out for help. One participant offered a relative to care for his children and household tasks in exchange for a place to stay, but he refused. On the day of the forced marriage, she said to the man she was expected to marry, "you can just leave me here and say I ran away [...]" but he pointed out that she was in his care and belonged to him." Overall, the internal and external "fight" throughout and at the time of the forced marriage represents the turbulent circumstances and anguish that participants experienced.

Participants' survival strategies in the face of emotional turmoil is captured in various forms of coping styles that they adopted and found effective. Most felt dissociated, lived in survival mode by "going through the motions", or tried to be excited despite feeling numb. Participants also engaged in self harm or attempted suicide to escape the pain. Hope, determination, focus, compartmentalizing, self-soothing, and praying were additional coping mechanisms that were reported. One participant stated that, she would pluck out all of her eye lashes, to "make a wish and then release all of them outside." Participants reported not having

the language to fully understand or express their emotions verbally, but they found different ways to work through their pain.

Taken together, with their basic human rights being violated, without a foundation of physical and emotional safety and love, they learned strategies that would help them survive and maintain hope. While effective in these circumstances, such experiences can leave lasting psychological impact with the brain wired for protection from others rather than connection with others. This is the foundation that shaped their childhood and worldviews through which they interpreted their experiences as adults, consistently leading to unhealthy attachments.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

There was variability in how participants made sense of their experience with forced marriage and what it meant to them. For some participants, marriage was an escape from their dysfunctional home, a hope for a better future, an opportunity to be accepted and loved by their parents, or a responsibility to fulfill their cultural or religious obligation as a woman. For some, it also represented fear, pressure, guilt, respect and honor, or lack of awareness that their marriage was forced, as a result of grooming.

Most participants felt conflicted between their own desires, fear and manipulation, and what their families wanted or what they thought would be acceptable to them. Describing her thought process on the day of the forced marriage, the following participant recalled thinking that “I don’t want this to happen to me. I am a child. I shouldn’t have to go through this,” but she went through the marriage to maintain, “the respect and the honor and the dignity” of the family. Consequently, she described feeling unworthy for “not being kept as their child, or for going through a good childhood and achieving her dreams. She felt like they thought she wasn’t worth that or deserved it.” Indeed, most participants felt abandoned and betrayed as a result of their

families not listening to them or prioritizing their wishes. Some internalized these messages as well, leading to difficulties later on in their lives in increasing their self-esteem and confidence. Additionally, some participants reported fear of religious consequences, of losing their family and community, or of feeling ashamed for going against the norms.

Among a host of complex emotions, some participants wanted to be accepted by their families which superseded attention to their own well-being. Others conceptualized their forced marriage as an escape from the existing violent circumstances and hope for a better life. It also offered an avenue to feel wanted and cared for. One participant shared that, “I was not aware of what marriage was, what the contract was about or anything like that. For me, it was all about I was getting the attention.” Although participants did not have a voice in the decision-making process, it seems that they were able to make meaning of what the experience represented to them. The grooming process, lack of support, absence of other opportunities, and living in survival mode are factors that might have contributed to how they experienced this process. Additionally, rationalization might have increased their perceived sense of control and hope, a coping mechanism.

This theme is meant to unearth the unique ways in which participants experienced their lives leading up to the forced marriage, the gravity of emotional strife, and their thought process as they navigated the lack of choices and autonomy in guiding their future. The presence of intergenerational trauma, along with the patriarchal influence in some families, seemed to have created chaos and instability, with caregivers misusing their power and asserting control. At the core of it all seems to be the participants’ search for and absence of safety, belonging, and love.

Experiences during the forced marriage

Handed over: Turning Daughters into Wives and Mothers

This theme reflects participants' experiences with transitioning into their married lives. It highlights the continuation of violence, gender socialization, and internalized oppression in their identity development process. Participants' stories reveal their challenges with nurturing and protecting their children, despite them doing their best as mothers to provide a different life for them. In fact, their children witnessed, or directly experienced violence, leading to behavioral problems reflecting the same patterns that participants experienced with their caregivers as children. Indeed, intergenerational trauma was passed on. The two subthemes that emerged were 1) chained: the silent, obedient, servant wife and 2) attachment injuries.

Chained: the Silent, Obedient, Servant Wife

All participants continued to experience violence during their forced marriage, often in multiple forms including physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, financial and spiritual abuse. They found their abusers very controlling and reported death threats, gaslighting, bullying, social shaming, and isolation. Also, some participants were denied contraceptives, were expected to stay at home where they prioritized household tasks and childrearing, and/or were kept from continuing or beginning formal education. Questioning the norms was not allowed as it was deemed disrespectful or stepping out of the bounds of their role. It was expected that participants would abide by rules set forth by their abuser and the community and if not, face abusive consequences. Some participants developed physical health conditions as a result of violence, including pelvic floor scarring and vaginal pain, headaches, backaches, memory loss, and skin rashes.

Men as well as women sometimes perpetuated the violence. One participant described the following, “I was just expected to play the role of a silent obedient servant wife; I would get slapped and hit and all of that. And his mother would defend him; It was the woman's responsibility no matter what to make it work and not to ask questions.” This experience reflects the continuation of gendered expectations to carry the patriarchal norms modeled for them prior to the forced marriage. The expectation to serve, remain silent and be obedient along with the responsibility to make the marriage work characterizes the social status of participants as girls and women in their families. This also highlights how women can contribute to their own and others’ oppression, a consequence of internalized oppression.

Participants also reported social norms and community expectations that contributed to the violence and led to internalized oppression. One participant stated, “people would say to me like you’re the perfect wife, you are so obedient. When you guys go out, you’re just quiet and you let him talk.” She also reported fear that “he is going to correct me in front of everybody and I’m gonna feel stupid, so I’ll just be quiet.” Evident here is the submissive attitude being perceived as perfect, along with the role of fear of social shaming that contributed to silence. She reported sexual violence and when she refused sex, “he'd be like, what is wrong with you? What is wrong with you? And I'd end up crying myself to sleep thinking, well, maybe there really is something wrong with me.” Indeed, being continuously told that they were not good enough contributed to participants experiencing increased self-doubt impacting their sense of self-worth and shame. Even despite their efforts to be perfect, they still experienced abuse, leading to identity confusion. Overall, the aforementioned experiences laid the foundation for their married lives and grooming continued as they adjusted to new expectations and standards of living.

Worn out: “why don’t I feel like I love?”

Participants who had children became pregnant immediately after the forced marriage, except one who was pregnant prior to the forced marriage as a result of rape. This was not surprising given the denial of contraceptives or absence of sexual and reproductive health education. These participants described the pregnancy and parenting experiences in different ways. What they all had in common was difficulty in keeping their children safe from physical or psychological harm and providing emotional nurturing. As a result of this, some participants reported that their children exhibited early behavioral problems and long-term mental health difficulties throughout their adulthood.

The abusers’ misuse of power against the participants also extended to their children. One participant shared, “there definitely was some gaslighting and emotional abuse and manipulation there. And he would tell her things like, your mom's unstable and she can't really care for you. And I really believe that that interfered with her attachment and her sense of safety and security, really early on. So she's always been an anxious little bundle and she would rage against me.” Children also witnessed and directly experienced violence when their fathers were abusing the participants. The inconsistent messages and lack of established safety may have been confusing for children keeping them from building a foundation of trust and love with their parents.

Regarding emotional nurturing, majority of the participants described loving their children and providing for their physical needs but reported difficulty in being affectionate with them. There were challenges with feeling disconnected and emotionally numb. For example, one participant expressed difficulty in emotionally connecting with her son and said, “I smiled and I acted all proud of him; As he walked away I realized I felt none of that; I was going through the motions that I felt nothing; I definitely feel like I think the children to a certain extent did feel

that.” Given the abuse was worse after the forced marriage, many participants continued to go through the motions, a learned coping mechanism, potentially to block painful feelings and to prevent being overwhelmed emotionally. Although these participants may have an understanding and thoughts of loving their children, the absence of emotional memories of love or experiences with love could have prevented them from feeling it and expressing it in ways that their children connected with. This could be a consequence of the participants’ own detachment from their primary caregivers and violence beginning early in their own lives.

Overall, it seems that participants encountered multiple challenges as they raised their children. Physical and emotional safety, belonging, and love are critical for children’s growth—all of which seemed to be lacking for their children as a result of participants’ own powerlessness in the face of abuse as well as their own limited physical/emotional resources. This experience is impactful for participants as they seemed to carry a sense of powerlessness and feelings of guilt about not being able to do better. There is indication of participants’ desire to protect and love, but not being able to do so. Given the intensity of their own trauma, dissociation, and resulting low self-worth, love may have remained a cognitive concept rather than a feeling they experienced in their bodies.

Battling for the Second Wind: Self-preservation, Courage, and Perseverance

Participants’ efforts to adjust to their married lives and cope with new challenges are illustrated in this theme. Given the absence of alternatives and being trapped in their marriages, they found different approaches that allowed them a greater sense of control. Their experiences during the forced marriage as well as inner struggles continue to reflect confusion. The emotional turmoil led them to suppress their thoughts and feelings, resulting in short-term and long-term mental health consequences. Participants eventually reached a point when they considered

ending their marriages. This theme captures their disappointment and helplessness after returning empty handed from repeated attempts to find support or an escape. The three subthemes include: 1) a spark of resiliency in compromised and adaptation; 2) weathering the storm; and 3) nowhere to go: the search for a lifeline.

A spark of Resiliency in Compromise and Adaptation

Given the lack of support, no escape routes, and the desire to minimize the violence or to be accepted by their partners, many participants described attempts to make the marriage work or to accept their new lifestyle. This occurred at different times in their married lives and consisted of attempts to make sense of their experiences through rationalizations. Even though there was a sense of some inner struggle until the time of marriage, their perspectives began to shift as they adapted to the forced marriage itself.

The longing for acceptance and love continued after the forced marriage, with shifting behaviors to increase the likelihood of that happening and to decrease the violence. One participant stated that, "I didn't want to get him angry. So I would try to be perfect; I wanted him to love me and to care for me and to accept me." When she had a disagreement with him, she said, "I didn't talk back. I didn't retaliate. I swallowed it because I think greater for me was the pain of not being accepted, and plus I was pregnant." The standard to be perfect and submissive is reflected here as a means of love and acceptance, which participants learned at an early age and struggled with even after their forced marriage ended. The choice to remain silent seemed to represent self-preservation while still living in untenable circumstances. It is also a coping mechanism to prevent fear and pain of losing people from whom they expected support.

Participants had recognition of being too young for marriage but experienced confusion regarding what was expected of them, particularly with pregnancy and raising children. Without

seeing other alternatives, they went along with conceiving and raising children without questioning, as characterized by one participant's words, "I definitely didn't think that I could be what I wanted to be; that would have been so far removed from my present reality; I tried to really accept my role as a wife; I wanted to be a good mom and a good wife." Among other things, the recognition of their realities and the expectation of their role as wife and mother seemed to have led them to acceptance, despite reservations. Indeed, some participants described the role of insight, reality testing, and resiliency in being able to adapt quickly. Additionally, there was evidence of shifting identity from becoming a good daughter to being a good mom and a wife; however, the adherence to standards of being obedient and submissive remained.

As participants transitioned to being wives and mothers, accepting their roles appears to be evident of the lack of additional choices rather than an opportunity to truly express themselves and to explore their identities independent of their abusers. Their sense of self seems to be embedded in their assigned gender roles that had been role modeled for them by their families. Most importantly, participants' ability to acclimate and interpret their experiences in ways that allowed them to cope captures their resiliency.

Weathering the Storm

This theme reflects participants' coping mechanisms to manage stress. Their emotional reactions remained similar to experiences prior to the forced marriage, with feeling confused, afraid, powerless, hopeless, guilty, resentful, and silenced. Dissociation, distraction, and parenting were described as the most common ways of coping with these feelings, characterized by "going through the motions" "or playing house" by staying engaged in household tasks and taking care of their children.

Dissociation seemed to be a response to the post-traumatic stress. This was often accompanied with high levels of anxiety and obsessive-compulsive behaviors (OCD), eating disorder and body shame, hypervigilance, and depression. One participant reported feeling lack of control in her marriage and said that while she “couldn’t control anything else in her life, she could make sure her counters were sparkling clean.” This led to her “cleaning the house again and again” even if it did not need cleaning. Likewise, given that most participants were confined to their house, they found behavioral outlets at home for suppressed emotions.

Some participants reported parenting as a positive transition in their married lives. It represented different things for all participants. It was described as a distraction from their own pain or it offered purpose and fulfillment. One participant reported that, “she didn't know how to take care of herself or self soothe so being able to comfort a crying baby was fulfilling all of her voids and her own personal needs.” Parenting was described as “selfless” which brought feelings of relief from having to think about and attend to their own needs since they would not have been fulfilled in that environment anyway.

Hope, self-compassion, self-empowerment, optimism, determination, and faith were also reported as coping mechanisms. Among a host of overwhelming thoughts and feelings, participants experienced a sense of conviction in that despite their circumstances or what they are being told by others, they were worthy and capable of more than what they were led to believe. A notable takeaway here is the importance of context that shaped their worldviews and their unique approach to navigating their challenges. Although there may be similarities in their stories, participants may attribute different meanings to their experiences.

Nowhere to Go: the Search for a Lifeline

With continued violence, multiple failed attempts to make the marriage work or to increase their autonomy, and their children being at risk for serious harm, participants eventually began to consider ending their marriages. A few participants described wanting to run, but not knowing where to go, who would help them, and what they would do. This occurred at different stages throughout their married lives. One participant shared that “even if I wanted to walk into the domestic violence women’s shelter, at that point I wouldn’t even be able to, cause I’m too young.” Age as well as experience were factors in participants’ lack of resources and support to leave the forced marriage. Never having experienced a life without violence and extreme isolation appeared to result in limited knowledge about where to turn for help or what steps might be necessary in leaving.

Fear of hurting their children or their children being taken away from them along with concerns about financially supporting and caring for their children also kept most participants from attempting to leave. Many had never lived by themselves, which carried the fear of being alone. Divorce was seen as “forbidden” for a few participants and given the spiritual abuse experienced, some were afraid of going to hell had they attempted to leave. Additionally, there was no financial autonomy or resources and support to help guide them through the process of leaving if they seriously considered it. One participant explained that she even reached out to her mother and voiced that “I’m afraid for my life. I’m afraid for my girls. Can I move in with you temporarily just until I figure out my next step? And her response was to turn around and walk out of the room without even answering me.” She added that “the shame and stigma of being divorced was bad enough [for her mother] and to have a divorced daughter as well would have been too much.” This is similar to participants’ experiences throughout their lives with reputation

and community identity taking precedent over their wellbeing. The consequences of social exclusion might have been more threatening. This theme is also congruent with participant's desire to escape from their homes prior to the forced marriage. They are feeling trapped even more so with their children and still not knowing where they can turn to or the consequences seem too impactful. This represents their ongoing search for safety and independence for themselves and their children.

Parting Clouds: the Path to Freedom

This theme describes participants' circumstances that led them to find a sense of conviction in their decision to leave the forced marriage. Interactions with others outside of their own community helped them recognize that they could live differently, leading them to question their current status. These new insights for some participants resulted in existential crisis as they tried to make sense of the violence they had experienced, which had become a normal part of their lives. This theme reflects the internal and external challenges participants experienced as their decision became a reality, including fear of getting caught, risking their children's lives, and guilt of going against what they had been taught. The awakening and breaking through the cage are the two subthemes.

The Awakening

With nowhere to go and being turned away from help, as participants considered alternatives to being alone at home with their children, they began advocating for their needs, beginning with seeking permission from their partners to start school, a job, or driving. This process began at different stages for different reasons, but majority of the participants remembered being more assertive after their children were born and felt more empowered to take lives into their own hands. Becoming a parent was described as a significant shift in how some

participants viewed themselves and their roles. One participant said, “having my first child and becoming a mother definitely lit a fire in me of just doing things different. I wanted to be the kind of person that she could look up to and grew up to be like.” Some participants described feeling empowered to begin or continue their education and to secure a job to financially become independent and eventually leave. While some participants had already been working toward becoming more independent, the inspiration to be someone their children could look up to seemed to play a significant role in them taking more responsibility. They reported a desire for their children to have a better life than their own.

Furthermore, participants had been socially isolated both before and during their forced marriages resulting in a lack of contact with others outside of their family or community. This kept them from being able to see how others lived and whether what they were told in their homes was grooming and brainwashing. However, at different times in their marriages, they found opportunities to meet with others and these interactions with the outside world were encouraging as they began questioning their lives. This was a long process and as a result of these interactions, along with additional opportunities to increase their autonomy, they began acknowledging the violence, questioning their experiences, and connecting with their feelings that they had suppressed all along. One participant described her interactions with doctors as empowering and said, “I realized the hearts they had for their patients and how much they truly cared. It’s also the first time that my voice was valid; it started to empower me as a person; it’s the first time that somebody shook my reality and made me realize that there are people on the outside world that are not evil.” This was one of her first experiences with being cared for as a person and being heard and treated respectfully.

Although some participants had known all along, to some extent, that there was more to life and they could do more, it required validation from interactions with others to believe that in fact they were being held back and there were ways to leave. This was a long and painful process for many as they noticed that their lives were not what they chose. Going through this pain, surviving the emotional turmoil that had been suppressed, and finding the courage to take responsibility was the beginning of their efforts to break the cycle of violence.

Breaking Through the Cage

Participants described their experiences regarding their decision to leave. This process also varied in time and length for all participants. They reported various forms of barriers they encountered as well as the psychological shift required in their thinking to go through with their plans. It was during this process that participants began creating a sense of self independent of who they were expected to be in order to feel accepted, wanted, and worthy. They began prioritizing their own needs. Their desire for a meaningful and fulfilling life led them to explore their own values and to begin living accordingly rather than submitting to their families' expectations.

Regarding external barriers, leaving required foreplanning, which meant secretly contacting people or going to therapy, school, work without permission while they secured financial resources. Participants described a lengthy divorce process, sometimes resulting in additional violence and mental health consequences. In describing her challenges, one participant shared that after she rented her own apartment, her abuser "let himself in the middle of the night and he raped her; he would file for 100% custody and try to eliminate her parental rights," Despite telling in court that her abuser was a "pedophile" the judge granted him custody. Her daughter was sexually abused during the process of finalizing the divorce. This signifies the

failure of the legal system in protecting them. Similarly, other participants reported difficulty shielding themselves and their children from the harm that took place during and after the process of leaving. Among many difficulties, housing, financial, and social barriers were reported as most detrimental to their well-being, that sometimes led to them returning to their abuser given no alternatives. Consequently, for a few participants, it took multiple attempts to leave or to completely cut off contact with their abusers.

Regarding internal factors, participants reported a range of feelings and inner conflict as they prepared to leave. One participant described the few weeks prior to leaving as “terrifying”, with fear of being caught and kept under “house arrest” She also described feeling “intense release because she was finally going to become the person she always knew she could be.” Not only did some participants carry the fear of getting caught, but also the guilt and burden of breaking their family and harming their children. On the morning she left, this participant remembered thinking that, “she is going to ruin her children's life. They will never again go to sleep feeling like their world is whole.” Participants’ decision and actions carried great risk and a heavy price if they were not successful in their attempt to leave. However, they described reaching a point where they did not see another alternative to ending their marriage. This required letting go of the hope that their circumstances will get better, described as a grieving process. Fear seemed to be the most overwhelming feeling accompanied with determination, courage and belief in themselves regarding the ability to go through with the plan. This process was an evidence of their already shifting identity from who they were forced to be to who they wanted to become.

These excerpts capture the complexity of the process of leaving, with multiple overwhelming external factors to consider as well as internal reactions. This signifies the level of

courage, resiliency, and perseverance of participants as they created and followed through their plan to leave while ensuring safety and resources for themselves and their children. Although terrifying and cumbersome, this process carried hope for the future and relief with opportunities to live their dreams, to have a fulfilling and meaningful life, and to break the cycle of violence.

Experiences after the forced marriage

Attending to the Wounds: a Bittersweet Journey

After having left the forced marriage, participants found themselves recognizing the depth of hurt and pain that they experienced throughout their lives along with its short-term and long-term effects. They described struggling with moving on by themselves and utilizing unhealthy coping mechanisms to manage stress, such as using substances and entering into abusive relationships. This theme also reflects participants taking charge of their healing process despite the challenges they encountered. They reported various activities that allowed them to express themselves and feel supported as they recovered. The two subthemes are 1) living the trauma and mourning the losses and 2) healing and reclaiming the self.

Living the Trauma and Mourning the Losses

Participants described a host of thoughts, feeling, and experiences as they left and began acculturating to a new environment. Among others, the feelings of anger, sadness, betrayal, shame, worthlessness, and loss stood out as the strongest. They reported difficulty transitioning to living by themselves as a result of anxiety, fear, flashbacks, hypervigilance, and lack of connection and trust with others.

Some participants found it difficult to relate to and trust others due to cultural differences and traumatic responses, as evidenced by the following, “my whole life experience was so

different for most people that I sometimes feel a little bit of a hard time relating to the people who grew up in this culture and are still part of it.” In describing lifelong emotional impact, this participant said, “I have trouble trusting people and, forever single, I don’t want someone, a relationship. I can’t imagine that somebody won’t end up hurting me.” For many participants, lack of trust and emotional support was accompanied with anxiety and fear of being alone, which led to engaging in other harmful relationships.

Participants described sadness, betrayal, powerlessness, and ambiguous loss, with not having anything tangible to grieve. One participant reported feeling, “robbed, like on all levels. I never felt like there was any justice for me or my kids. It was almost like we were just kind of thrown away like we served whatever purpose that they had for us.” Although participants had experience different types of losses all along, this one seemed to be experienced most intensely as there was an increased insight of what their families had done.

Along with the challenges to adapt to a new environment, participants struggled with the aftermath of their traumatic experiences as they carried the weight of the responsibilities that came with their decision to leave. They began experiencing different types of emotions rather than numbing or dissociating. Leaving, despite the anguish, symbolizes their courage, strengths, resiliency, determination, and commitment to a brighter future for themselves and their children.

Healing and Reclaiming the Self

The decision to leave, the opportunity to turn their lives around, and the responsibility and freedom of guiding their own future carried a sense of empowerment. While navigating challenges, participants explored various avenues that offered emotional and physical healing, safety, and stability in their lives. Social support, therapy, identity exploration, hope, optimism, and gratitude played a central role in a positive transition. Participants also described virtual

mentors, self-help readings, reflective journaling, praying, meditating, and dancing as instrumental in their healing process.

Some participants described therapy as instrumental in their growth. One participant described the psychoeducation and validation as life changing and said, hearing her telling me you should feel that way and it's okay that you feel that way and it's normal that you feel that way and anybody in your situation would feel that way was like a thousand pounds fell off my back, it was extremely validating.” Validation seemed to offer participants the permission to release suppressed emotions and to be authentic with themselves in a supportive space.

Participants empowered themselves in different ways and made lifestyle changes that led to healing. The following participant described reading, meditation, and gratitude as influential and said she recovered, “mostly by reading books which empower you, which don't drown you in sadness, and grief and instead they uplift, that you have power, they give you the tools to overcome your struggles or your challenges. So, I read a lot, I meditated, and I still do every single morning. Gratitude helped and I do this with my kids.” Participants emphasized the importance of empowerment as well as the skills to effectively cope.

Participants’ healing process varied based on their environment and opportunities. Small changes in daily lives seem to have made significant impact. Common with all of these experiences is participants taking charge of their lives and making choices that felt right for them. Safety, positive interactions with others, and confidence played an important role in their transition.

Silenced No More: Transforming Pain into Purpose

This theme continues to reflect participant’s healing process as they refuse to be taken advantage of and rebuild their own and their children’s lives. It captures their process of finding

a new meaning and purpose in their lives, one of which is to break the cycle of violence through empowering themselves and other women experiencing similar circumstances. Roaring back, rebuilding the nest, and liberation: women empowering women are the three subthemes.

Roaring Back

Participants described their identities strengthening throughout their healing process. There is evidence of increased self-efficacy and a sense of control in being able to direct their lives. One participant shared that, "I'm a grown woman. I have aspirations, I have things that I want to accomplish in my life and I'm not going to let anybody cheat me out of my own life; I feel very solid in my sense of self. I feel empowered. I feel very confident in who I am today." Self-doubt seems to have been replaced with confidence. It also highlights the shift from participants surviving previously to beginning to live according to their values.

As participants experienced ongoing difficulties, they reported self-reflections and affirmation as reminders of how courageous they were. This served as a foundation for their persistence in continuing to overcome challenges. The following participant said that, "when I start to feel down about myself or feel like I can't do something, one of my favorite self-affirmation quotes is that I walked into the lion's den and I roared back at the lions and I walked out and escaped. That's how I feel most of the time." Participants reported feeling proud of themselves which combated against feelings of shame and worthlessness.

A reflection of their previous experiences highlights their strength and resiliency that continue to be encouraging for them in their healing process. Self-awareness seems to be an important aspect of identity development and empowerment. The language to understand their experiences, acknowledgement of what they have struggled with, and the control and

responsibility were additional components imperative for them to continue to raise their voices as they create a different future.

Rebuilding the Nest

One of the reasons participants had left their forced marriage was to prevent their children from similar experiences and to break the cycle of violence. Participants described their children's mental health struggles and their attempts to help them heal or to offer a better life after they left their forced marriage. Although some lacked parenting skills, they learned from their own experiences and used them as a guide throughout their children's upbringing. This was an empowering experience for them as it brought a sense of purpose and meaning. One participant shared that, "I want them to learn how to be happy, how to be successful, how to be strong, so they can do this thing called life; I want my kids to grow up knowing that they always have the power. They have the power to make decisions on their own and to always know that no matter what things will be okay." It seems that participants utilized their own healing process and emerging values to pass on the wisdom. They valued independence, authenticity and autonomy which they role modeled and encouraged for their children. This process signifies a chain effect of challenging the status quo in the family and community.

Liberation: Women Empowering Women

Majority of the participants found it healing to connect with other survivors, to hear and share their stories, and to offer mentoring. This was also connected with a sense of empowerment, and feeling seen, heard, and represented. Similar to role modeling for their families, this experience also increased their sense of purpose. One participant found it empowering to be "able to be a voice." She said, "I've had countless girls text me and [say] thank you for speaking out, thank you for sharing your story. Because of this I feel like I can do X, Y,

Z.” She added that, “if my story helped one person, it would make it worth it; It's been extremely healing for me.” For participants, being able to give back represents that their pain and suffering were not in vain.

There is evidence of a potential group identity that emerges as a result of sharing and hearing stories. The following participant shared that, “I think that's what's so powerful about meeting other survivors and hearing their stories [...] they're also on the same path that I am. Like as soon as they're free from the situation, they want to go back and free other people. And I think that speaks loudly to that this is an oppression or slavery of some sort that people need to be like almost emancipated from.” This connects strongly to the theme above, roaring back, in that they this participant and others have joined together to advocate for others and offer support and hope.

The role of mentoring seems invaluable for all participants. In addition to a meaning and purpose in their lives, this might also contribute to increased confidence and sense of self-worth. This experience offers an opportunity to establish social support, connect with others, and share their own stories as well. A few participants reported not fitting in to their new environment or not feeling understood after leaving their forced marriage and this might be an exception to that, offering a sense of belongingness.

Discussion

The qualitative method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis and Feminist Standpoint theory were utilized to explore the following two research question: 1) what are the lived experiences of women who have been forced into a marriage and 2) how does the experience with forced marriage impact their psychological well-being? Relevant findings related to various psychological factors, coping skills and help seeking behaviors, needs,

challenges, and barriers to resources will be summarized in this section. Furthermore, theoretical, clinical, policy, and research implications of findings will be discussed.

Outcome of Research Inquiries

Research Outcome, Question 1

Research question 1 centered around understanding the lived experiences of women who have been forced into a marriage. This consisted of exploration of impactful circumstances prior to, during, and after their forced marriage. Particularly, challenges, barriers to resources, and needs were explored.

Congruent with previous research, participants reported experiencing multiple forms of violence (Sri, 2013; Dank, 2013; Tahirih, 2011, Swegman, 2016), including physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and spiritual abuse, pressure and coercion, manipulation, social shaming, lifestyle restrictions, deception and abduction (e.g., taken overseas against their will), and domestic violence. Most participants described their community and family system as misogynistic and patriarchal, which emphasized gender socialization and grooming of girls and women as submissive. This was influenced by cultural or religious practices and led to gender-based violence and forced marriage. Results in the present study are consistent with international research that violence is not specific to only the event of a forced marriage, but rather is an approach and a process to socialize women to uphold patriarchal ideals (Villacampa, 2020; Chantler & McCarry, 2020). Consequently, participants lacked choice, power, voice, and autonomy (Sri, 2013; Dank, 2013; Yetu, 2012), all of which were reflected in gender expectations and were a barrier in participants being able to engage in self-advocacy to prevent their forced marriage.

Participants reported challenges, barriers, and needs during the process of divorce and after the forced marriage. Some participants did not see their marriage as forced or could not envision a life outside of what was expected of them. They were also unaware of services or were too young to stay at a domestic violence shelter if they chose to leave, which prolonged their stay in the forced marriage. Previous research confirms that lacking awareness of forced marriage services as well as their legal rights prevents women from seeking help (Love, 2019). Findings in the present study show that once participants contemplated divorce and expressed their intentions, their families or abusers utilized pressure and shaming along with physical, sexual, spiritual, and emotional violence to prevent the divorce. This is consistent with previous research that families continue to engage in similar abusive patterns that led to the forced marriage (Chantler & McCarry, 2020). Adding to the previous research, results in this study identified that families increased barriers by utilizing the legal system to keep participants from seeing their children and complicated the divorce process by influencing the community leaders against participants. Furthermore, participants in this study highlighted a need for stable housing, financial resources, childcare, transportation, adequate healthcare, legal representation, and educational and employment opportunities. For some participants, an absence of these resources led to them returning to their abuser or not being able to provide for their children. Existing literature has also emphasized the importance of comprehensive long-term services (Villacampa, 2020; Brandon & Hafez, 2008; Khanum, 2008; Swegman, 2016) in order to offer psychological and physical safety and stability to women who are forced into a marriage.

Research Outcome, Question 2

Research question 2 centered around discovering how the experience with forced marriage impacted participants' psychological well-being. Results of this research revealed

macro and micro level factors that influenced participants' psychological well-being. These included individual, family, community, cultural, socioeconomic and religious dynamics.

Findings also highlighted help seeking behaviors and coping mechanisms.

Whereas research has considered and investigated religious and cultural influences that may lead to forced marriages (Kopelman, 2016; Alanen, 2015, Yetu, 2012), the role of familial psychological distress due to intergenerational violence and trauma has yet to be explored. Participants' upbringing was heavily impacted by adverse childhood experiences (ACE), independent of cultural and religious factors. ACEs encompass emotional, physical, sexual abuse and neglect as well as household dysfunction such as domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illnesses, parents' divorce or imprisonment, and not being raised by both parents or biological parents (Waite & Ryan, 2019). ACEs also consist of systemic inequity such as limitations to quality education and healthcare, legal and social services, economic and housing stability, and social support. Stories of women who participated in this research highlighted that as a result of intergenerational violence and trauma, and these systemic barriers, primary caregivers experienced great difficulty in creating physical and psychological safety, belonging, and love for participants. This suggests that for this study's participants, ACEs and consequential trauma may have set the foundation for increased psychological harm and vulnerability to violence, including forced marriages instead of only cultural or religious practices. The presence of ACEs presents complex multidimensional dynamics and with the forced marriage research still in its infancy, caution is necessary and causal relationships between cultural and religious practices and forced marriage cannot be assumed.

Previous research denotes behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and physical consequences of ACEs (Finklehor, 2013) and most of this study's participants described such consequences

within their own lives including, but not limited to, chronic physical and mental illnesses, risky health behaviors such as substance abuse and sexual activities, lower quality of life, and social difficulties (Waite & Ryan, 2019). Furthermore, it appears that exposure to prolonged stress disrupted many participants' sense of internal stability and the self-regulation processes, (Finklehor, 2013), leading to symptoms of trauma. As a result, they experienced difficulty in emotionally nurturing their children, which is very similar to their own parents' experiences, highlighting the intergenerational influence of ACEs. Some participants confirmed that their children suffered long-term mental health consequences. Although previous literature has reported similar physical and psychological challenges with marrying young (McFarlane, 2016), data specific to forced marriage within the context of ACEs has not been explored.

Furthermore, the psychological effects of gender socialization and power imbalances have not been addressed in the forced marriage literature. Feelings of inferiority as females as well as the pressure and efforts to uphold the gender norms in order to experience love, acceptance, and belonging appeared to have perpetuated internalized sexism and identity confusion for these sample of women forced to marry. They feared ostracization, social shaming, and punishment, which also led to superficial behaviors and inauthentic relationships. These experiences are supported by previous research related to internalized sexism. David (2013) reported that gender role conditioning requires taking away essential aspects of humanity by categorizing people's behaviors as desirable or undesirable that are also connected with reward or punishment. Therefore, feelings of inferiority, humiliation, and exclusion as a result of socially disapproved behaviors and acceptance, approval, and inclusion as a result of socially approved behaviors is common phenomena that impact women. It seems that this experience led to

participants of this study disconnecting from themselves and instead becoming lost in social expectations that lead to self-doubt and emotional distress.

Consequently, participants experienced internalizing symptoms that influenced their help seeking behaviors and coping strategies. Prior to the forced marriage, majority of the participants mostly sought support from immediate or extended family and relatives. They mostly utilized maladaptive and reactive coping styles, such as dissociating, avoiding, distracting, or justifying and denying the severity of abuse. Toward the end of their forced marriage, concern for their own and their children's safety, increased insight of how oppressive their marriage was, a desire for wanting more in their lives and hope for what life could be if they left led to their decision to divorce. Eventually, they sought support from their family members and relatives, friends, religious leaders, therapists, domestic violence shelters, advocacy organizations, or law enforcement. They began implementing adaptive and proactive approaches to coping such as problem solving, information seeking, and positive reappraisal. Spirituality and faith, altruism, meditation, reading and writing, sharing their stories with others and dancing to connect with their body were additional coping mechanisms participants utilized. Major determining factors in their more assertive approach during and after their forced marriage were empowerment, confidence, increased self-efficacy, and hope, all of which seemed to lack before the forced marriage, potentially as a result of internalized oppression and absence of support. The shift in participants experiences and approach has not been identified in previous forced marriage research.

Furthermore, empowerment played a central role in women's help seeking behaviors, coping mechanisms, and posttraumatic growth. Findings showed that participants' encounters with others outside of their community who respected and validated their experiences decreased

self-doubt by justifying thoughts and feelings that participants had previously dismissed. The increase in their agency and autonomy as a result of education, employment, and financial independence also contributed to feeling empowered. After their forced marriage, participants experienced encouragement and validation from sharing their stories, hearing others' stories, and publicly advocating for women's rights. Most identified the process of shifting from victim to survivor mindset as healing as well. Overall, it seems that seeing progress in their own lives as well as connection to others that allowed them to make meaning of their experiences and a sense of purpose led to empowerment. Similar findings have been seen in previous literature which show that sharing redemptive stories assist with identity development and generativity (McLean & Pratt, 2006; McAdams & Guo, 2015). Healing could be a result of increased agency and control in reconstructing and sharing their stories (Delker, Salton & McLean, 2020). Furthermore, establishing identity as a survivor and advocate may be connected with a sense of meaning and purpose. This data in addition to current findings of this study show that women's empowerment through efforts to dismantle the patriarchal system that perpetuates violence and discrimination is crucial in addressing forced marriages.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

Participants' stories identified dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression in forced marriages. Findings highlighted that participants' identities were embedded within the patriarchal structure that led them to unconsciously uphold the gender stereotypes, pointing to internalized oppression. Sexism also remained unchallenged by their mothers or other women in the community and instead the focus remained on maintaining the status quo in their community despite the oppression, also referred to as patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti, 1988). Regarding

men's oppressive behaviors, there was evidence of their efforts to maintain control over women's lives which was influenced by social norms and expectations, pointing to the possibility that they were also focused on maintaining their social status and might have felt threatened when their control was challenged, leading to violence. These findings highlight that gender socialization is a systemic phenomenon that affects both men and women.

The power imbalance and status of privilege and oppression is multidimensional that is maintained by everyone's behaviors combined. While men (fathers and husbands) upheld a privileged status on the basis of gender and social capital, leading to women's oppression, women (mothers and mothers-in-law) maintained relational privilege over other women (participants) which also perpetuated violence. Feminist standpoint theory simplifies this phenomenon by claiming that knowledge that stems from marginalized social locations is more important or privileged than information from dominant privileged views because it captures a more comprehensive perspective of reality (Harding, 1997). This stance disregards the complexity of intersecting identities and experiences that inform social locations as well as the status of privilege and oppression. Instead, what should be considered is a systemic approach that captures multiple standpoints, without one being considered more important or comprehensive than the other because individuals can hold privilege in one dimension and be oppressed in another. Therefore, while forced marriage research and its conceptualization from feminist standpoint may begin with women who have direct experience with forced marriage, it is also important to shift the theoretical perspective to be inclusive and allow for multiple standpoints that include various stakeholders such as other women in the community and men to unveil a more holistic perspective of underlying mechanisms that lead to forced marriages. This may

assist in implementing individual and social change from within the community and creating allies within and between communities.

Furthermore, a feminist intersectional framework of violence against women may be a better alternative to conceptualizing women's experiences with forced marriages. Donnelly et al., (2005) suggest that the assumption of all women being affected equally by violence is embedded within white privilege. Violence is shaped by other forms of oppression as well and patriarchal influence may vary across cultures (Sokoloff & Pratt, 2005). Additionally, women's understanding of violence also depends on the cultural context (Gartner, 2000), which may lead to them experiencing it differently. This theoretical foundation offers more flexibility to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of forced marriages, which may further help with creating multiculturally appropriate interventions.

Clinical Implications

Results confirm that oppression of women within the patriarchal structure encompasses the misuse of power on multiple dimensions, including historical, sociocultural, economic, political, religious, and relational dynamics. All of these factors combined inform women's experiences as well as interpretation of their social location (Wiseman, 2017). Participants in this study confirmed that their identities and approach to managing their circumstances were influenced by these factors. Therefore, it is crucial for mental health providers to account for women's intersecting identities and conceptualize the mental health impact of forced marriages within the larger systemic context. This will allow for an individualized and holistic understanding of their distress, minimizing pathology, and preventing marginalization of specific cultural or religious communities (Ebetrak & Cowart, 2017; Sabbe et al., 2014), increasing help seeking behaviors. Furthermore, a social justice framework of feminist theory should be

integrated in provision of mental health services by emphasizing social change and activism instead of only working at the micro level with interventions focused on individual assessment and diagnosis (Tseris, 2013). This is crucial in empowering clients given that participants in this study experienced internalizing symptoms and blamed themselves for external circumstances.

Additionally, mental health professionals should take an embodied approach to healing trauma and move beyond talk therapy. Participants in the current study experienced betrayal trauma, which is characterized by violence and neglect from primary caregivers before the age of 18 (Waite & Ruth, 2019). Such trauma leads to more severe symptoms when compared with other forms of trauma (Edmonds, et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2016), impacts brain development, and is stored in different parts and layers of the body, which require access to multiple forms of treatment modalities (Waite & Ruth, 2019). Therefore, accessibility to adequate mental health services is crucial to women who have experienced forced marriages in finding appropriate psychological/behavioral health treatment. Along with betrayal trauma, participants in this study experienced ambiguous and complicated loss and grief, which was characterized by psychological losses that were not clear or tangible such as the sense of losing their childhood. This ambiguity can lead to stuck emotional reactions, preventing implementation of effective coping, especially when there is a lack of closure (Boss, 1999; Boss, 2007). A particular focus on this, along with the themes of power, shame, self-blame, and stigma should be emphasized in therapy. Additionally, the framework of attachment and bonding should be incorporated in therapy, especially for those who report trauma beginning in early childhood and the potential impact of violence on their children. Interventions from this framework can be utilized to enhance social connections, increase emotion regulation, adapt a coherent sense of identity, and form healthier relationship with the self, others, and the environment (Johnson, 2019).

Moreover, trauma-informed interventions should be available for the entire family system (individual, couples, and family therapy). A focus on parenting skills to increase social and emotional resiliency of children, knowledge of creating healthy interpersonal relationships, and learning adaptive self-regulation techniques would be beneficial for women and their children who have experienced forced marriages. Mental health providers should also be cautious of the mainstream trauma treatments that predominately emphasize biomedical approaches, increasing likelihood of pathology and decontextualization by engaging in symptom-based work and decreasing attention to social context and gender inequity (Tseris, 2013).

Regarding specific interventions, findings suggest that participants in the present study found normalization and validation in therapy very effective, along with psychoeducation regarding various forms of violence, and power and control dynamics. These modalities assisted in participants feeling more confident in how they perceived their experiences to be rather than what they were told to think by their perpetrators leading to increased empowerment. These processes also helped them in the initial steps of creating identities independent of their perpetrators. Furthermore, participants found it healing to share their stories with others and mentor those with similar experiences. It helped them feel heard as well as not feel alone in their experiences. Program development for mentoring opportunities with structured support for women should be considered to prevent vicarious trauma. Lastly, particular attention should be given to prevention of re-traumatization, especially when clients are already overwhelmed prior to beginning therapy, which may increase their sense of vulnerability.

Policy Change Recommendations

Participants in this study reported lack of support and access to resources prior to the forced marriage which was not just specific to the issue of forced marriage, but also related to

concerns of adversity, described above. This reflects limited resilience of family and community members to foster a nurturing environment for these participants that warrants close attention. In establishing resiliency, research highlights the importance of collaboration at multiple dimensions, including caregivers, extended family members, employers, behavioral healthcare providers, legal and social services, and educators (Waite & Ruth, 2019). Therefore, awareness at all of these levels seems to be the first crucial step in beginning to create policy change. Within educational settings, inclusion and training of trauma informed work in the context of ACEs and curriculum specific to the dynamics of forced and child marriage, including the patriarchal foundation is highly recommended. Utilizing findings to create training for mental health professional in various settings, including schools, domestic violence shelters, primary care facilities, legal entities, and community health centers may also equip professionals to assess and implement appropriate interventions at earlier stages. Additionally, outreach efforts and creating allyship within the communities may lead to a better understanding of families' needs and increased utilization of services offered. Given that participants in the present study reported limited social support as detrimental to their well-being throughout their lives, this collaboration is the foundation for lasting change.

Furthermore, findings in this study challenge the current policy focus on increasing the age of marriage. Given the complexity, this may not prevent all forced marriages and could potentially lead to more harm by excluding others when age is not a factor and those who may not want to pursue a legal route (Love, 2019). This may also lead to a decrease in help seeking behaviors, especially if it results in marginalization of specific communities. It is important to highlight that participants in this study not only discussed age as a concern, but also noted difficulties in maintaining stable housing, employment and economic security, and physical

safety, which increased adversity, leading to health disparities, and chronic and serious physical and mental health issues. This suggests a more comprehensive approach that addresses the complexity of forced marriages.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations that should be considered in future research. Participants' age at the time of the interview significantly varied. The amount of time they spent in their forced marriages and the time passed since their divorce was also not controlled. Some participants were more established in their careers, whereas others were exploring their career options. This led to some participants being able to offer more in-depth context given their age and experiences at structural levels, whereas others mostly spoke to the impact of forced marriage at an individual level. While all insightful, it would be beneficial to take a closer look at each stage of the recovery and the associated challenges separately for more specific interventions.

In continuing efforts to improve provision of mental health services, quantitative work with larger samples would be beneficial in creating instruments and taking a closer look at constructs such as empowerment, self-efficacy, internalized oppression, and the acculturation process when transitioning out of their communities to either prevent a forced marriage or exit one. Within the context of intersecting identities, particular attention should also be given to the identity of a victim, survivor or survivor/advocate that some participants described. While this was not explored in the current study, existing research suggests that the identity shift from victim to survivor or survivor/advocate is often conceptualized as a redemptive and a linear healing process (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2020). This assumption can marginalize individual

who may not fit into this narrative or may not have access to such an experience given their social locations and the context of trauma, such as racism.

Furthermore, given that all participants in the current study described education and employment opportunities as empowering, a closer look at their experiences in academic institutions and employment settings would assist in identifying potential barriers and resources needed to increase access. Such investigations also may provide insight related to the role of higher education and employment in their sense of independence and change in relationship dynamics, specific to the continuation of abuse and severity. An emphasis on vocational identity development, vocational self-efficacy, and transition from a collective identity to individual identity may provide insight related to change in their mental health.

Although findings in this study provided an evidence of challenges related to identity development and oppression, further examination of intersection of gender identity with race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or immigration status should be explored. Additionally, research has been focused on identifying challenges prior to or during the forced marriage and attention to difficulties transitioning out of the forced marriage has been neglected. Findings highlight numerous mental health and systemic challenges participants and their children experienced after leaving so further assessment of what support systems should be in place is recommended, especially related to social support.

To conclude, this is first study in the field of mental health that explores the impact of forced marriages throughout participants' lifespan. Findings have highlighted contextual factors, the severity of trauma, and unique aspects of experiences before, during, and after a forced marriage, as well as challenges while entering and exiting a forced marriage. It is evident that for change to be significant in preventing forced marriages, successfully transitioning out of the

forced marriage, and creating intergenerational change, a holistic approach to assessment and intervention is warranted. While little is known about their families' struggles, participants' own experiences as mothers, the continuation of the intergenerational trauma, and their process of leaving offers directions for change.

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