

Challenging paths to safety – ethnic minority women leaving abusive relationships and access to social work support

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Data and method

Life story interviews with women with relevant experiences (N = 15)

Ethnic minority background, mostly in the Middle East

Various generations (1G, 1½G and 2G)

Semi-structured interviews with frontline workers (N = 32)

Social workers, doctors, shelter employees etc.

Topic: Support needs of ethnic minority women

We need to increase our understanding of border-crossing phenomena and their impact on social work (Schrooten, 2021).

Due to migration: Meeting between:

Citizens with a migration background from (more) *collectivistic* societies

Social workers from an *individualistic* nation state (Hofstede, 1980; Pelham et al., 2022)

What are the needs?

What is the help? And do the two match up well?

Framework and conceptual approach

Gendered geographies of power (Mahler and Pessar, 2001):

Individuals are embedded in matrixes of domination on different scales, for example:

- Family embedding (natal family; conjugal family)
- Class embedding
- Nation state embedding

Embedding is central for women's scope for agency.

Social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar, 2002):

- Symbolic boundaries - categorizing individuals
- Social boundaries – separating groups of individuals; includes geographical boundaries

Boundary crossings - different types and scales

Social boundaries:

- 1) Boundary crossings of migration – between different parts of the world
- 2) Boundary crossing out of home when leaving abusive husbands

Symbolic:

- 3) Boundary crossings (or not) as transgressing “family honor” boundaries

About honor: Norms and female conduct

Taboos related to women's conduct in intimate matters (huge variations) – more important in more collectivistic societies

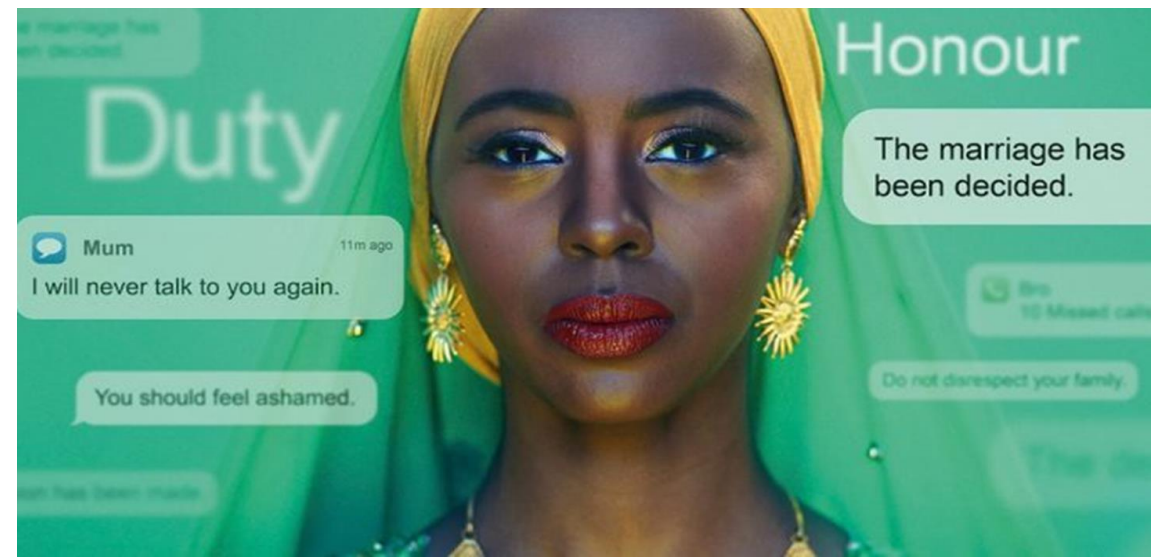
Central: No sex outside of marriage (virginity is key)

Divorce may be a troubling anomaly, but can also be acceptable

The "misconduct" of one family member may reflect badly on the entire family

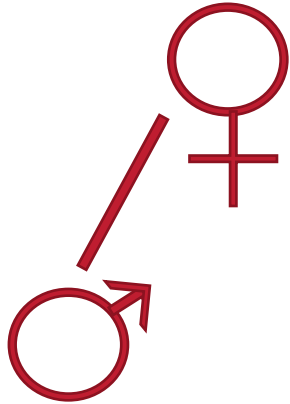
Norms enforced through ostracism, threats, violence

Women should show patience/ sacrifice themselves



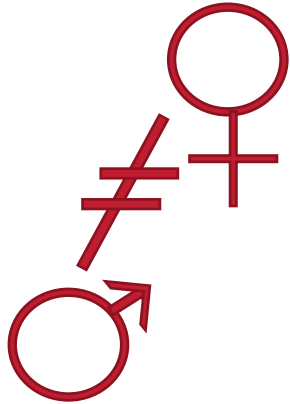
Women leaving husbands – understanding different trajectories

National understanding (in Danish social work)



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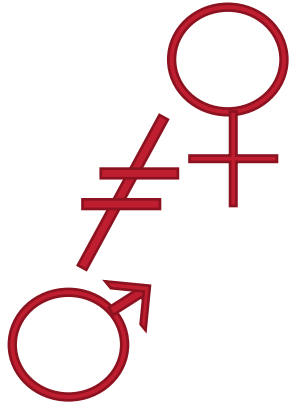
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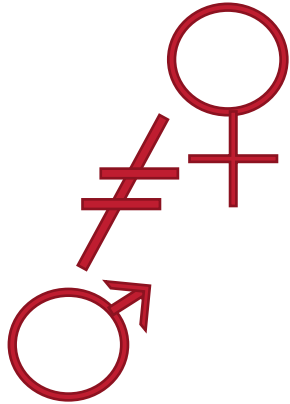
National understanding (individualistic)

Transnational needs (collectivistic)

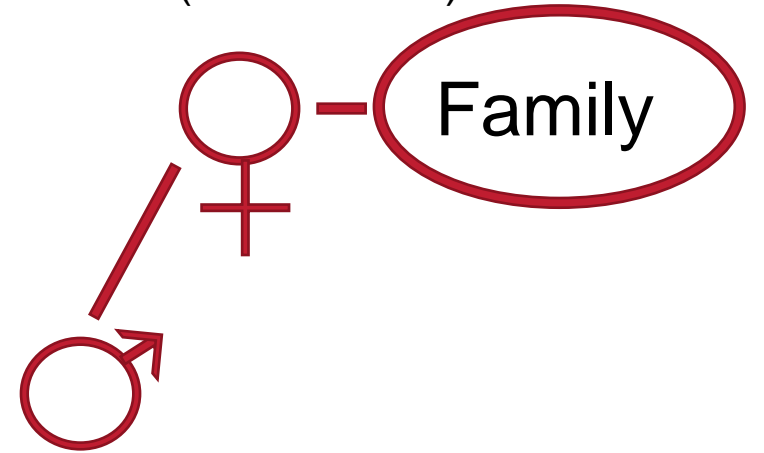


Women leaving husbands – understanding different trajectories

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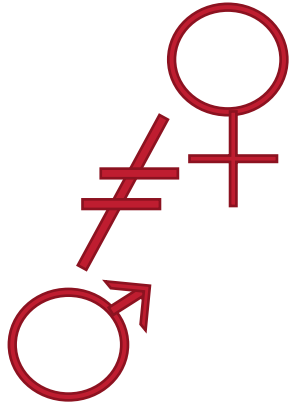


Transnational needs (collectivistic)

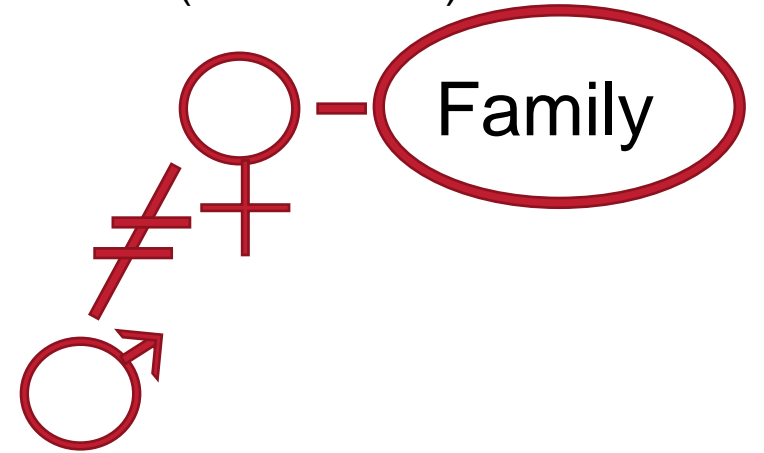


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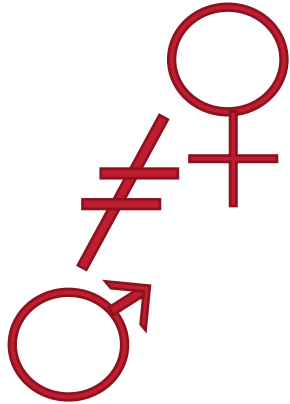


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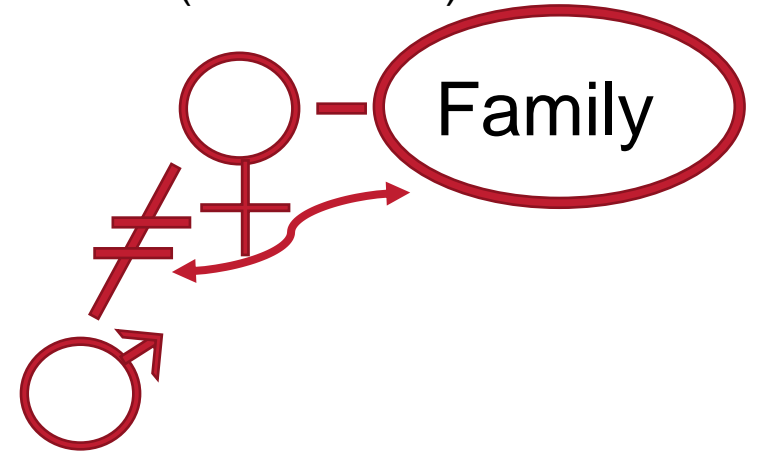


Women leaving husbands – understanding different trajectories

National understanding (individualistic)



Transnational needs (collectivistic)



Women leaving husbands – understanding different trajectories

Dual movement:

Mobility out of marriage (crossing **social** boundary)

- Possible through for example going to a woman's shelter

Mobility out of marriage (crossing **symbolic** boundary)

- Does leaving the husband make you a "bad woman" to your natal family – or not?

I: Bahija, 1½ G.

Arranged marriage at age 19. Wants to leave it right away – but is unable to.

...“The problem was, that I needed to get my family over on my side. They were the ones, I had to convince that I could get divorced – that they should help me.

The municipality told me, that I could just get a divorce. I have a friend who is a social worker. He told me: *‘If you want, I can help you with going underground’*. But that was not what I wanted

Stays within bad marriage for years. Only leaves after ensuring family support

II: Jawaria, 2G

Jawaria was married when young – wants to leave husband, and does so. Goes to women’s shelter.

“My family felt that I was a big problem for them: I went against their values. *‘What would people say, now they had a divorced daughter?’*

... But by moving to the shelter, I had drawn a line: I can fend for myself. And a month later, I moved back, and we arranged for a divorce”.

Later, at a family get-together: “...My father threatened me out of the blue. He said: *‘I am an old man. I can take 16 years in prison’*...

What he meant was: *‘Don’t you do anything wrong’*. And *‘wrong’* for them is *‘boys’*. I have to guard the family honor”. (.... Bodily proximity)

Uses access to shelter to leave; confronts natal family. Must negotiate tensions afterwards **VIVE**

III: Silaah, 1½G

Silaah was forced into a marriage when she was 16 years old (in 1980s)

“I got beaten. I got a bloody nose and bruises. Then I went to my father, but he just said: “That serves you right”... Then I packed a bag, and went to a [local] woman’s shelter.

But they knew where I was and every day, my ex would come and yell at me, and the staff would call the police and take him. But he would come back the next day. I was so scared....

Frontline workers told Silaah to prepare herself to be “*alone for the rest of your life*”.

Two years after she left her husband, Silaah went back to her natal family: : “*I felt very empty. I had missed my family. So I returned to them*”. Accepts a second marriage: “...*“I have no way out. I cannot run away again, because I missed my family so much. I better get the best out of it”*”

Acts independently through accessing a shelter. But later returns to an unchanged situation

Centrality of retaining family relations

Specialized front line worker:

A woman, who got pregnant out of wedlock was forced back to the contry of origin, to marry a cousin. Had one more child. Was exposed to severe abuse.

“.... we were able to help her back to Denmark with the two small children.

But about a year later, she wanted to return. She missed her family. She was totally isolated. She had no network, and the loneliness was intense.

In that way, some of the women, who have to cut all their ties, end up returning [to their families] again.”

Crossing social and symbolic boundaries

Collectivistic needs:

- Important for women to retain place in their natal families – must negotiate it themselves
- Dual negotiations of relation to husband and relation to (most centrally) fathers
- Retaining family relations also gains importance due to marginalized positions in majority society

Individualistic support:

- Approach that women should cut all ties can be difficult / impossible
 - Attempts of developing new methods – e.g. family mediation (Dullum, 2020)
- Never the less, e.g. shelter space enables independent action. Central for women's ability to act

II: Transnational issues vs. national support

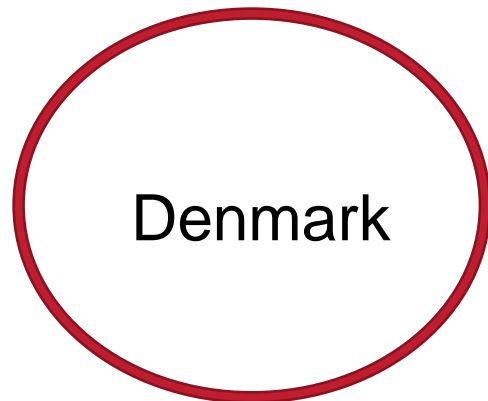
Crossing national boundaries



II: Transnational issues vs. national support

Crossing national boundaries

National support provisions (in social work)



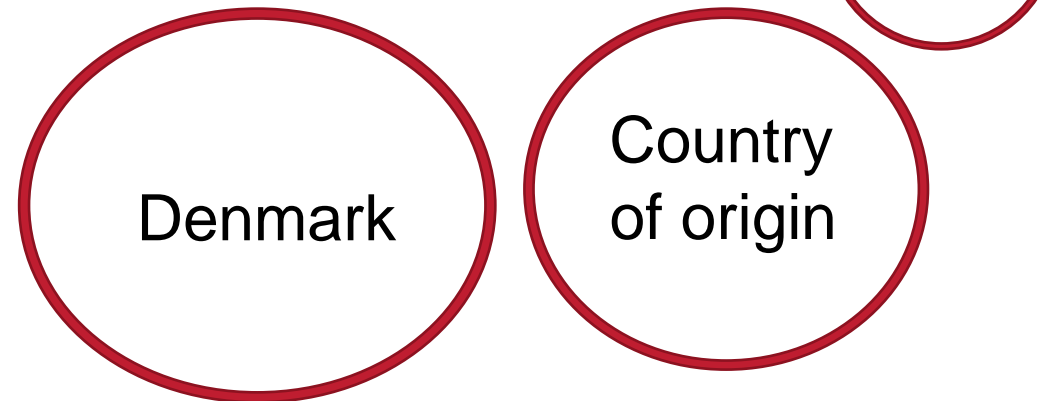
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National support provisions (in social work)



Transnational needs of women



Women more weakly positioned in country of origin I

Roya (1G): Husband beats her when they are on holiday in Iran.

“...if he would say, that we should stay [in Iran], what could I do? It was just so stressful, year after year” [to go to Iran].

The first time her husband beats her in Denmark:

“I thought about it for a couple of days, and got over the shock [of being hit]. Then I called him and said: ‘If you ever do this again, I will report you to the police. I don’t care if you are the father of my child.

You just need to know this: we live in Denmark. We are not in Iran”.

Women more weakly positioned in country of origin II

Silaah (in the 2010s – divorced and with a boyfriend):

Asked to visit estranged father in Turkey, who she is told is terminally ill.

Silaah is beaten to within an inch while the father shouts:

“I will enjoy killing you. I will enjoy burying you in the back garden. Nobody will find you. I have had enough of you”

Border-crossing strategy I: Child abductions – fears and realities

Bahija and her ex-husband get joint custody after she divorces him:

“...he could easily make them Iraqi passports and citizenships and take them out [of Denmark] and no one would be able to stop him”.

Specialized front-line worker: “I just had a case where the father abducted two of the children. There were four in all and he took the two youngest. He had them out of the country for several years, and turned them against their mother, which is also harmful to the children.

While the children are back in Denmark today [due to the man’s financial problems], they will not have any contact with her”.

Border-crossing strategy II: Hurting significant others abroad

Zahra's story:...

“They call my friends and my family: ‘You must tell Zahra to hand the children over to us or we will kill her – or we will kill her family’. They say a lot of things and cause a lot of problems.

In the end, they beat up my father really badly – they paid someone to do it. He ended up in hospital for many days... I get very scared and very sick.

The municipality tells me: ‘*We can change your name and help you move to another place in the country*’. But I don't think it will help. There is still his family and my family – and they beat each other. If I move, they might kill each other. So I say no”.

Difficult access to help – also inside Denmark: Legal changes shifting power relations

Toxic relationships worsened by the increasing precarity of residency rights – enables men to “weaponize borders” (Del Real, 2019; Segrave, 2021).

Effectively suspends supportive Danish space, keeping women trapped in private space

Frontline worker:

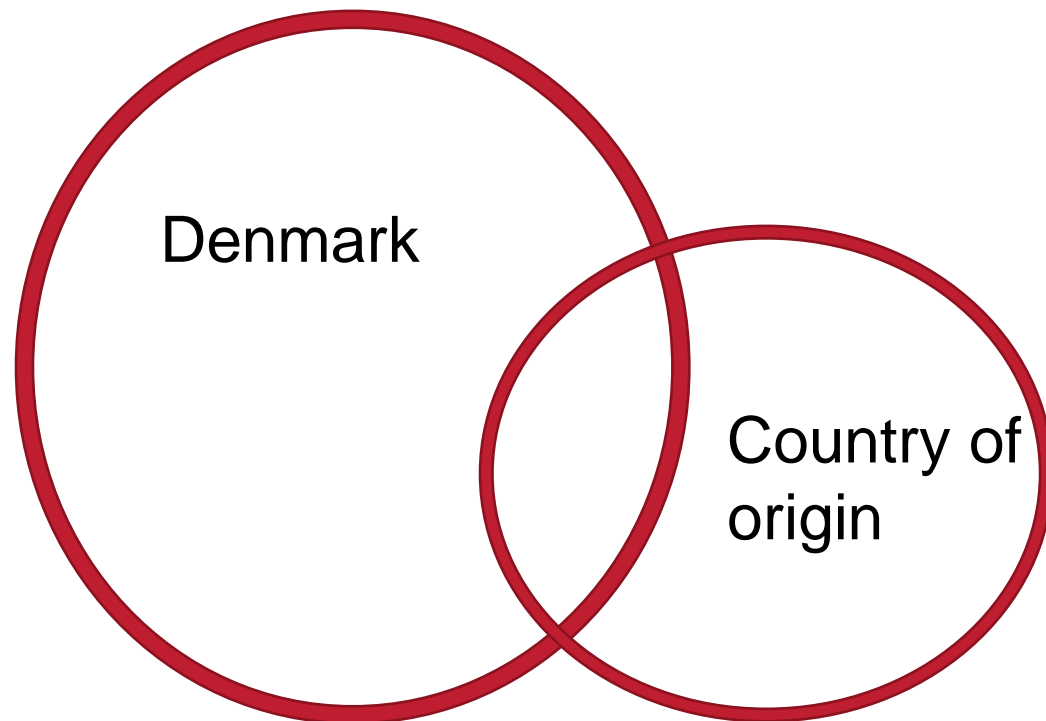
Women she counsels just stay [in abusive relationships]... “They don't feel that they have a choice. I can counsel them for a hundred years, and it won't make any difference. Because they ask me [about residency permits].

And then I have to say: ‘Well, we can't do anything about that’. It is a frustrating situation”.

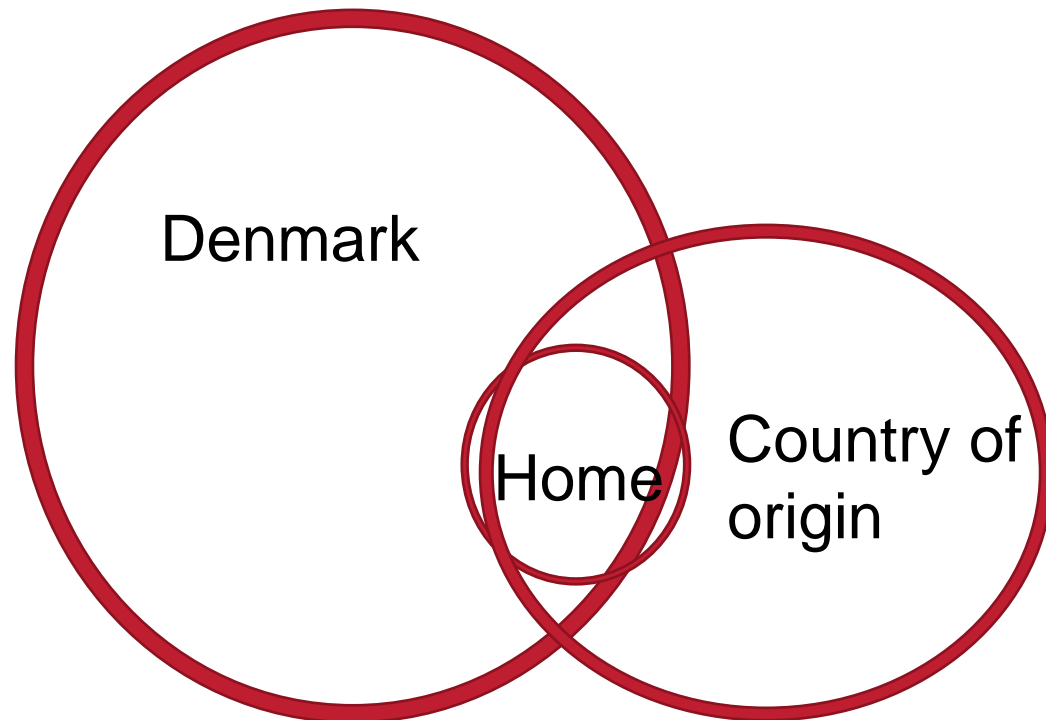
Insecure residency blocking women's agency



Insecure residency blocking women's agency



Insecure residency blocking women's agency



In conclusion: Social and symbolic boundaries in a globalized context

- Different "rules of the game" in different parts of the world
- Individualistic social work is not well-suited for the women's more collectivistic needs
 - Women are left with limited support options
- Inside / outside Denmark – better / poorer access to support for (individual) women
 - Strategic struggles to move family conflicts
 - Can include "proxy" abuse (of children or parents)
- Central issue is safety on a national level – trust in being able to remain in Denmark
 - Increasing precarity due to "return turn" shifts boundaries, reducing women's scope for agency

Thank you for your attention

Further reading:

Liversage, A. (2022). **Abducting children abroad: gender, power and transnational mobility in immigrant family conflicts.** *Violence Against Women*, 28(5), 1139-1157.

Liversage, A. (2022): **A Janus-Faced State – Uncertain Futures and Frontline Workers’ Support for Immigrant Women Experiencing Abuse.** *Genealogy*, 6(2), 1-14.



Thank you