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Gender-based violence, religion and forced displacement: Protective and risk factors

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Introduction: This paper examines the relationship between gender-based violence (GBV) and religion in a range of forced displacement contexts. While it has been acknowledged that religion frequently shapes experiences of GBV survivors, little is known about the influences of religion on GBV experiences in forced displacement and its potential role in strengthening interventions.

Methods: Utilizing empirical evidence from 58 interviews from the SEREDA project with forced migrants in Sweden, UK, Turkey and Australia, we outline the interactions between religious resources and GBV in migrants' forced displacement experiences. We conceptualise religious resources as comprising religious ideas, religious practices, religious experience and religious organization.

Results: Survivors talked about religion spontaneously when responding to questions relating to resilience, coping mechanisms, and risk factors. Religion acted as both a "protective" and "risk" factor for GBV experiences. Religious beliefs were assets in coping with GBV experiences, but also contributed to creating an environment in which violence was normalized, exposing women to further harm. Religious practices supported survivors emotionally to cope with GBV but also some practices posed risks. Religious organizations in many cases served as a lifeline for many displaced women, offering practical and emotional support, however religious leaders at times encouraged survivors to stay in abusive relationships. Religious experiences "empowered" and "disempowered" survivors across the processes of forced migration.

Discussion: We demonstrate the relevance and importance of acknowledging the role of religion in the experiences of GBV in forced displacement. Our analysis advances the understanding of religious resources as both protective and risk factors that affect forced migrants' experiences of GBV over time and place. We suggest a way forward for practitioners and researchers to account for the roles of religion in experiences of GBV and forced displacement, as opportunities and barriers to GBV prevention and response, and to work with religious leaders and local faith communities to strengthen protection of survivors.

KEYWORDS

gender-based violence, religion, migrant, refugee, displacement

1. Introduction

Forced displacement hit a record high in 2022 with numbers close to 100 million (UNHCR, 2022). Displaced people are subjected to high levels of gender-based violence (GBV), exploitation and trafficking. The exact numbers of forced migrants experiencing GBV are unknown and the proportion varies dependent on context but can constitute up to 70% of women (Keygnaert and Guieu, 2015; Gonçalves and Matos, 2016), with under-reporting the norm due to social and cultural barriers, fear of punishment, stigma and shame (UN Women, 2013). Religion remains an important concern for most of the global population with more than eight in ten people worldwide and many migrants

maintaining some religious affiliation (PEW Research Center, 2010, 2012). The role of religion in the experiences of GBV in development settings have been explored by scholars and practitioners from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including international development, humanitarianism, psychology and global health. There is an emerging body of work focusing on the influences of religion in shaping incidents of violence in migration and forced displacement settings (cf. Lusk et al., 2021; Pertek, 2022a). However less is known about how religion manifests as a “risk” or “protective” factor in GBV experienced in forced migration. A better understanding of religion as a “risk” and/ or “protective” factor can help explain why certain individuals or groups are more or less likely to become victims of GBV and the way in which religion acts as a protective factor to lower risk or support recovery (cf. Murphy et al., 2022).

GBV and intersecting forms of violence in forced migration occur along a continuum of violence from pre-migration, conflict, flight to settlement in countries of refuge (Pertek and Phillimore, 2022). Incidents of violence occur across time and place and at the hands of different perpetrators. The role of religion in this continuum is under-theorized and under-researched despite the recognition that religion travels with many forced migrants across locales and stages of migration (Knott, 2016) and that most migrants maintain a religious affiliation (PEW Research Center, 2012). This paper addresses these gaps in knowledge by asking the question “how do religion and GBV interact in forced displacement settings?” and what are the key religion-related “risk” and “protective” factors intersecting with forced migration and GBV?

Although there is no single definition of GBV, and different definitions are used across different sectors (e.g., sexual and gender-based violence—SGBV—and violence against women—VAW), here we use the Inter-Agency Standing Committee IASC definition of GBV, commonly used by the international community:

“an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private.” (2015; p. 5)

We note, however, the limitations of existing definitions of GBV, SGBV and VAW. While they often recognize power imbalances and the social construction of social relations between women and men and their socially ascribed roles and responsibilities, they tend to overlook the continued nature of violence experienced across the life-span. Therefore, we wish to acknowledge the importance of recognizing the continued nature of GBV experiences in processes of forced migration and the multiplicity and complexity of violent incidents which can extend beyond the above definition.

This paper begins by outlining the state of knowledge around religion, GBV and forced migration. It proceeds with methodology and the analysis of findings structured around different types of religious resource, identifying protective and risk factors, and follows with discussion and conclusions.

1.1. Religion, forced migration, and GBV

There is no single universal definition of religion. Herein we refer to religion as an institutionalized system of belief or practices regarding a supernatural power, while faith includes various forms of belief or trust in some form of transcendent reality (cf. Lunn, 2009). We recognize that religion is enacted by social actors and can contribute to, or counter, violence including GBV (Pertek, 2022b). People experience religion in diverse ways (Rakodi, 2007). On the one hand, it can support resilience and opportunities to prevent and respond to GBV, and on the other hand, it can compound intersectional vulnerability. Galtung has discussed religion’s potential to facilitate peace (1997/1998), identifying it as a meaningful factor in the violence system (1983/1984) with potential to influence “positive” peace outcomes and social justice through “the integration of human society” (Galtung, 1964; p. 2). Analysis has yet to be undertaken to bridge understanding of the micro implications of religion at the level of individual lived experience and scant attention is given to religion related vulnerabilities/“risk” and “protective” factors/coping strategies, alongside the macro/social justice potential of religion in relation to GBV in forced displacement. The failure to empirically investigate the role of religion in GBV against forced migrants, the vast majority of whom express religious affiliations, represents a missed opportunity to understand how vulnerability might be reduced and resilience built.

Religion and forced migration interact in complex ways. The state of knowledge on religion and forced migration demonstrates profound religious influences on forced migration experiences. Migration for some is part of theology (Winkler, 2017). Religion travels with migrants and can be the source of comfort and hope in perilous journeys (Gozdziak, 2002; Knott, 2016). Displaced populations may draw psychological, spiritual and material support from their religious beliefs and practices (Parsitau, 2011; Eppsteiner and Hagan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). In particular, during the refugee journey, religious rituals and metaphors of survival are important resources. However, in immigration contexts, the religion of immigrants remains contentious and may shape public attitudes toward welcoming the other (Wilson and Mavelli, 2016). In particular, binary views on religions as good or bad contributes to hostile immigration policies with discriminatory resettlement criteria (ibid), such as that implemented by the Trump regime. Associating some religious identities with violence and the “War on Terror” increases xenophobia which, in turn, enables the “securitisation” of refugee movement, while hindering humanitarianism. In addition, some religious symbols, such as a hijab (head covering) and a beard invoke gendered anti-Muslim discrimination. For example, the 2016 “refugee crisis” exacerbated resentment against Muslims in non-Muslim countries, resulting in thousands of assaults, hate crimes and hate speeches against Muslims (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2018). Moreover, religious organizations play an important role in responding to forced migration. They are often the first respondents in displacement emergencies. Faith based organizations (FBOs), local faith communities, congregations, and faith leaders have traditionally contributed to a wide range of humanitarian activities, including providing physical protection, facilitating access to

aid, mediations with host communities; peace-building activities; combating discrimination and addressing GBV (Marshall et al., 2021). Yet, the religion and gender nexus has not received enough attention in forced migration literature. Even less is known about how religion impacts the gendered experiences of forced migration at different stages of migration, in terms of vulnerability to violence and discrimination, and of resilience in the context of GBV and forced migration.

Recognizing religion as a marker of identity that intersects with culture and social norms, studies have also demonstrated how the intersection of culture and religion can expose women to gendered harms (Ghafournia, 2017; Pertek, 2020). Some have problematized how cultural interpretations of religious beliefs often shape gender norms which can manifest in intimate partner violence or contribute to tolerance of violence in society (Nadar, 2005; Ghafournia, 2017). Kulwicksi et al. (2010) highlighted how power holders, such as religious leaders, encouraged women in certain cultural contexts to endure abusive relationships.

In a forced displacement context, misinterpretation of religious texts has been used to incite violence toward religious minorities, fuelling hostilities and symbolic violence in resettlement settings. Religion can thus be a source of discrimination, persecution and violence with some visible religious identities exposing survivors from ethnic minorities to heightened discrimination. There is extensive evidence of high levels of discrimination and violence against religious minorities, in particular anti-Muslim discrimination in countries of immigration (Mirza, 2013).

Religion can also exacerbate structural violence, for example religious discrimination in the labor market can lead to the impoverishment of refugees. Structural violence can in turn generate conditions in which domestic violence is reinforced (Hourani et al., 2021). The fear of religious bias and prejudice, stemming from embedded structural violence, prevents many survivors from accessing support services (Ahmad, 2018). Ahmed shows how Muslim survivors of domestic violence in Canada reported being confronted with derogatory comments such as “doesn’t your religion allow the husband to hit his wife?” (Ahmad, 2018, p. 5). Support services often lack capacity to fully engage with survivors who are religious and as such may be unable to offer appropriate care by failing to build upon religious coping mechanisms or mitigating against religion-related drivers of violence (Pertek, 2022b).

Yet, faith and religion can often act as protective factors in GBV and forced migration. Recent research has illustrated how religion is often used as a primary coping strategy for GBV survivors including those in displacement (Shaw et al., 2019; Rutledge et al., 2021). Studies have reported how survivors often hold onto their faith as if it was their only lifeline, drawing strength and resilience from their religious beliefs and practices (Pertek, 2021). In humanitarian crises people often turn to religion for meaning and relief from anxiety (Walker et al., 2012). For example, internally displaced survivors living in Mai Mahiu IDP camp, relied on their personal and collective faith and religious beliefs to process trauma and adapt to new circumstances, going beyond the support offered by faith-based organizations (Parsitau, 2011). The way Kosovar Albanian refugees arriving in the USA in the late 1990’s relied on religious rituals for healing has also been documented (cf.

Gozdziak, 2002). Similarly, African forced migrants in Tunisia have narrated their dependence on personal religious resources to cope with uncertainty, multiple migration-related stressors and sexual trauma (Pertek, 2022a). Likewise, Levantine women refugees in Turkey derived strength from their religion and adapted their cognitive, behavioral and spiritual religious coping mechanisms to deal with stressors in refuge and memories of war violence (Pertek, 2021). Despite this growing body of literature, policy and practice remains to be either focused on the negative impacts of religion, or ignores the importance of religion in the lives of many forced migrants. There is a gap in knowledge that brings together understanding of religious “risk” and “protective” factors for forced migrant survivors of SGBV from (i) a micro/individual perspective and (ii) a macro/collective agency perspective with the potential to bring about improved protection and support for SGBV survivors.

Many faith-based organizations (FBOs) respond to refugee emergencies by providing humanitarian assistance. Initiatives include psycho-social support to prevent the pathological consequences of traumatic situations, to help develop resilience and build upon the coping strategies of crisis-affected populations (Ager et al., 2015). The important role of local faith communities in strengthening the resilience of displaced people is also well recognized (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 2013) as is the role of faith leaders and faith communities in seeking to address GBV (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016; Le Roux et al., 2016). Scholars show how faith leaders have status, normative authority and power to influence people’s attitudes and behaviors (Tomkins et al., 2015). Bartelink et al. (2017) refer to faith leaders as “sleeping giants”; individuals who can be mobilized to become collective agents of change. Thus the failure to engage with religion around the protection and support of forced migrants who are at risk of, or being subjected to SGBV, is a missed opportunity.

To frame this paper and operationalise religion, we draw on Ter Haar’s (2011) conceptualization of religious resources, namely religious “ideas”, “practices”, “organization” and “experience”. This framework enabled us to explore the impacts of religious “risk” and protective “factors on forced migration and GBV in a systematic thematic manner. Ter Haar’s framework (Ter Haar, 2011) offered scope to explore the role of non-institutional realms of religion, which often manifests as “personalized religion” in forced migration experience. By personalized religion, we refer to non-institutionalized expressions of religion - individual religious beliefs and practices which may or may not on a organized system of belief or any religious institution. Other frameworks attempting to typologise religious resources are problematic because of their siloed focus on institutionalized aspect of religion and lack of attention on personalized religious resource domains. Given forced migrants’ lack of access to institutionalized religious practices, particularly at certain stages of their journey and in different displacement contexts, a person rather than an institutional conceptual lens was considered important. Adopting Ter Haar’s (2011) conceptual framework based on four religious resource domains, enabled us to respond to the gaps identified in the state of knowledge on religion, forced migration and GBV by operationalizing religious “risk” and “protective” factors. This also enabled us to capture the functional and non-institutionalized aspects of

religion, attending to what religion does in forced migrant survivors' lives.

According to Ter Haar's (2011) *religious ideas* relate to people's beliefs, which can also include gender assumptions. *Religious practices* refer to behaviors and rituals on the basis of their belief, also potential comprising gendered religious behavior. *Religious organization* relates to how communities organize themselves and can shape gendered power dynamics and *religious experience* refers to metaphysical experiences that religion may incite in believers which may themselves be gender specific (Ter Haar's, 2011; p. 8-9; Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). By structuring the paper around religious resources and how these are utilized at different stages of forced migration, we attend to a functional understanding of religion (Rakodi, 2007), i.e., what functions religion serves in lived experiences of GBV in forced migration. Our paper offers a new perspective on the role of religion in GBV experiences based on survivors' accounts enabling us to consider religion at personal, community and institutional levels.

2. Methodology

Based on the data collected in the SEREDA project, we examined how religion interacted with experiences of GBV for forced migrants. We draw on 58 in-depth interviews with survivors (Table 1) in four countries—UK, Sweden, Turkey and Australia, who mentioned religion in their interviews either as a protective or risk factor or both, as part of a larger project sample ($n = 151$). These countries were selected for diversity of contexts and to represent different stages and/or forms of displacement. However, we utilize the data from across those countries to identify commonalities of experience over contexts rather than to offer comparisons. In this way we identify the core religious resources utilized by survivors offering a framework with potential to enable future scholars to engage in comparative endeavors.

Survivors were recruited with the help of partner NGOs in each country, researchers' networks, social media announcements in English, Arabic, Swedish and French, and by using snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews explored survivors' forced migration and GBV experiences, the risks and drivers of violence, coping methods and support available. Most participants were from the Middle East and North Africa (37 respondents) and Sub-Saharan African regions (21). The majority were women (51) and five were men, one trans woman and one trans man. Respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 70's. Respondents held a variety of legal statuses, including: asylum seekers (11), refugees (25), rejected asylum seekers (8), International Protection (7), those on spousal visas (4) citizens (2), and undocumented migrant (1). A quarter of respondents were single, a third were married and less than a third were divorced or separated. Around 60% of respondents were of Christian background, and around 40% were Muslim. Many respondents were subjected to multiple victimizations by different perpetrators across time and place.

An intersectional feminist epistemology that considered why and how patriarchal power relations constitute women's daily lives (Bar On, 1993) and prioritized women's experiences as the basis of knowledge (Cook and Fonow, 1986; p. 2) combined with a social constructivist standpoint (Schwandt, 1998) underpinned the study design. This hybrid positionality enabled attention to

be placed on the subjective expressions of religious ideas within respondents' socio-cultural contexts. By so doing, we refer to the way that the social world, and the religious world, was seen by respondents and how they understood their experiences and constructed meaning and knowledge of religion and GBV in forced migration (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). By adopting intersectional feminist principles throughout our analysis we captured how forced migrants constructed meaning and knowledge of their own religious experiences in relation to GBV, which informed our understanding of the religious "risk" and "protective" factors relating to the Ter Haar's (2011) four conceptual religious resource domains.

Interviews were conducted by skilled multilingual researchers in the respondent's chosen language. Where necessary, researchers worked alongside trusted interpreters recruited from community organizations experienced in working with GBV victims. Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min and were audio-recorded, then fully transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using a systematic thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and coded inductively using NVivo software enabling analyses across various contexts and topics. Codes were developed collaboratively across the team with Author 6 undertaking validity checks. Ethical approval was received from the Ethical Review bodies of the four Universities (of Bilkent, Birmingham, Melbourne and Uppsala) participating in the study. All interviews were undertaken with informed consent and in a survivor-centered manner, meaning that survivors led the pace of the interview, and their safety and needs were respected throughout. Pseudonyms have been used in all project outputs. An extensive safety protocol was developed and implemented to reduce the potential for re-traumatization, and respondents in need of support were referred to appropriate service providers. Researchers' safety was also prioritized and access to clinical supervision enabled on a regular "drop-in" basis.

3. Findings: Religion and GBV

Survivors were not asked directly about religion, but 58 out of the 151 interviewed talked about religion spontaneously when responding to questions relating to resilience, coping mechanisms, and risk factors. Survivors spoke about both non-institutionalized (the personal) and institutionalized religion in the context of GBV experiences and the precarity of displacement conditions, interrupted journeys, asylum waiting and living in uncertainty. Our analysis demonstrates that religion acted as both a "protective" and "risk" factor for GBV experiences where protective factors are areas of resilience and opportunities for strengthened GBV interventions, and risk factors refer to vulnerabilities and barriers to effective GBV responses. We structure our findings around Ter Haar's (2011) framework on religious resources encompassing the four domains outlined above. In the following section we consider how these religious resources operated as opportunities and barriers to GBV prevention and response. We focus specifically on the interactions between GBV and religion across these different settings and stages of forced migration—from pre-displacement, in conflict, transit and refuge. We outline interactions between different types of religious resources and GBV in Table 2 and delineate them in relation to each religious resource domain in the following section.

TABLE 1 Survivor sample summary.

		Australia (11)	Sweden (10)	Turkey (9)	UK (28)	Total (58)
Region of origin	MENA and Central Asia	11	10	9	7	37
	Sub-Saharan Africa				21	21
Gender	Cis-woman	11	7	5	28	51
	Cis-man		2	3		5
	Trans woman		1			1
	Trans man			1		1
Age	18–20's		2	4	4	10
	30's	4	4	4	13	25
	40's	7	3	1	3	14
	50's		1		1	2
	60's					0
	70's				1	1
	Not known				6	6
Migration status	Asylum seeker		1		10	11
	Refused asylum seeker				8	8
	Refugee (permanent)	9			5	14
	Refugee (temporary)		9	2		11
	International protection			7		7
	Spousal visas	1			3	4
	Citizen	1			1	2
	Undocumented				1	1
Marital status	Single		2	3	10	15
	Married	4	3	3	8	18
	Divorced	4	4	2	6	16
	Co-habit				1	1
	Separated	2			2	4
	Widower	1	1	1		3
	Not known				1	1
Religion	Muslim	4	2	7	10	23
	Christian	7	8	1	18	34
	Other/none			1		1

3.1. Religious ideas

In this section we discuss how *religious ideas* shape experiences of GBV as protection and risk factors. Religious ideas are religious beliefs which stem from the articles of faith and personal beliefs related to religion, not necessarily shared by others. We begin with protective factors as these were most frequently reported by respondents.

Many survivors talked about religion as a coping and resilience mechanism. In the absence of other sources of support, they

drew strength from their religious beliefs enabling them to cope with the uncertainty and hardship of forced migration. The interpretation of life events, including migration, through religious beliefs, aiding respondents to find meaning and respite, was common; a practice known as religious coping (Pargament et al., 2000). Such coping supported survivors emotionally and psychologically, helping them to believe in a better tomorrow. For example Mira, who survived a perilous journey from Syria to Australia, in which she experienced injustice and abuse, also referred to the constant stress caused by her husband's anger,

associated with feelings of emasculation due to forced migration. She explained:

“So, thankfully, God stood with us and the year went by... Even though it was a really hard year, we survived, and we made it here.” (Female, 30’s, married, Christian, permanent protection visa, Australia)

Many survivors entangled in abusive relationships and, in exile, no longer able to be protected by family members, relied on help from God, saying they trusted God completely. God-reliance often enabled individuals to make meaning of current life events and to accept their hardships with gratitude. Many also believed in destiny and non-accidental events. Meaning-making based on religious beliefs helped survivors to manage trauma, including gender-based violence and psychological distress, and perhaps protected them from further psychological distress during precarious migration. For example, Ariam from Eritrea living in the UK said:

“For me, I’m a believer. I just believe things happen for a reason. So that’s one of the things that kept me going. Other than that, I would just go crazy because I have been through a lot.” (Female, 20’s, married, Christian, refused asylum seeker, UK)

Some used their religious beliefs to fight for women’s rights, finding the confidence to oppose patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and social norms. Others utilized their religious literacy to communicate with religious leaders in countries of immigration to ensure their rights were respected. For example, Linda from Lebanon and living in Australia, decided to seek divorce from her husband following emotional, economic, physical and sexual intimate partner violence (IPV). Her husband brought in a Sheik to attempt to pressure her to stay in the marriage, but she used her religious beliefs and knowledge to argue the case for a divorce:

“...Since you’re a Sheik, go open the Quran and see what God has revealed in his writing in terms of women’s rights, separate to what are rights for both men and women and separate to marriage rights... you have Surah Al-Nisaa (chapter of the woman) and Surah Al-Baqara (chapter of the cow) and you can also go read about how much the Prophet cared about women and believed in women’s rights...” (Female, 30s, divorced, Muslim, permanent resident, Australia)

Similarly, several respondents talked about using their religious knowledge to resist violence and precarity. Some in exile questioned their abusive husbands’ behaviors using religious teachings to try to protect themselves from further harm. For example, Amina from Syria challenged her husband on religious grounds when he tried to force her to have sex.

“He wouldn’t respond when I would say to him that religiously, he’s not entitled [to sex]. I would say to him, “you”re not allowed to come near me” because I know that, religiously, a man can’t force himself on a woman if she doesn’t want to have sex with him, it’s not allowed.” (Female, 40’s, divorced, Muslim, citizen, Australia)

TABLE 2 Religion and GBV - protective and risk factors (elaborated by authors).

Religious resource	Religious resource as protective factors (opportunities)	Religious resource as risk factors (barriers)
Religious ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Religious beliefs used to cope with abuse and displacement Religious beliefs used for meaning making Defending women’s rights by recalling religious beliefs/knowledge Resisting violence based on religious teachings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative religious coping and creating spiritual struggles Legitimizing violence against women Underpinning patriarchal norms Spiritual violence (psychological and emotional, justifying violence through religious beliefs) Normalizing and tolerating abuse Honor/reputation concerns
Religious practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayers on dangerous journeys Prayers helped to regulate emotions, reduce suicide ideation Reading religious scripture as distraction from daily stressors Praying to cope with trauma and to get rid of the abuser 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Religious marriage as vulnerability Divorce seen as unacceptable by family and wider society Religious discrimination at origin country and transit Islamophobia. Verbal abuse of women wearing religious attire.
Religious organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mosque as refuge at origin country Church groups help people on the move /in transit Faith groups offer emotional and practical support, social connections Religious leaders support women’s rights Religious conversion and new sense of belonging for survivors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Religious leaders advocate remaining in violent relationships LGBTQIA+ discrimination in church Inability to freely express oneself in terms of gender identity
Religious experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling empowered and protected by God Feeling prayers were accepted Gratitude for life and survival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayers to reverse gender identity/sexual orientation Limited religious freedoms in occupied areas and religious persecution

Nonetheless, religious beliefs also operated as risks across different stages of gendered experiences of migration. Sometimes negative religious coping could also undermine survivors’ emotional and psychological wellbeing and has been associated with negative mental health outcomes (Pargament et al., 2000). Some respondents questioned God about their fate and felt they were being punished by God through being subjected to GBV. Others questioned the existence of God explaining that their loss of faith had led them to contemplate suicide. Tamara from Iran, who lived in England, was isolated by her abusive husband leading her to question her faith and a spiritual struggle adding to the psychological trauma of GBV, and culminating in suicidal thoughts.

“...I’m always thinking, God what have I done, is it a punishment, I sometimes pray God, and then I say I have done nothing to you, why did you do that to me, when you do nothing ... I said I don’t believe you God...I know sometimes I told God I wanted to die, and I don’t want to take it anymore. A few times I said please God I want to die, I don’t want this anymore, this is too much, I can’t divorce, I can’t do anything, I’m stuck...everyday crying, believe [me] night-time cry, daytime cry...” (Female, 30’s, divorced, Christian, spousal visa, UK)

Some women survivors recalled abusers misusing religious beliefs to legitimize gendered symbolic as well as physical violence against them in both the public and private sphere. Such risks often traveled with them from countries of origin to refuge. They described how men used religious concepts to define and/or reinforce their masculinities and justify abusive behaviors. Respondents described how heteropatriarchal norms were deeply embedded within societal structures of countries and communities where religion governed the lives of women and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

“...Everything has some sort of religious decree to be ruled, where they manage to put religion in the middle of it all. Like they say, in Islam and Christianity, a man is the head of a woman, but of course the society understands this concept wrong. Men always paraphrase religion until it serves their purpose, thus in religion, women are always misrepresented...our problem is in our beliefs, where we are led to think that the man is everything and we are at large, a patriarchal society...Religion has a lot of influence, because we identify someone and evaluate their background and sexual orientation through religion.” (Female, transgender, 20’s, single, Christian, refugee, Sweden)

Manifestations of religion in daily life shaped the context and conditions in which violence and discrimination occurred pre-migration and in different stages of migration. Some described experiences of wider spiritual violence against women sanctioned by religious beliefs in which survivors were made to feel guilty and to submit to social norms requiring them to maintain their “honor” in different settings. “Spiritual” violence was used at different points of survivors’ lives, from the country of origin to a place of refuge, to make victims feel insufficiently religious, and encourage them to compensate for their shortcomings by submitting to patriarchal demands (mis)interpreted to align with religiously ordered behaviors.

Religious (mis)beliefs could also lead those closest to survivors to accept or even condone gendered violence and violent social norms. Violence could be normalized to the extent where harmful behaviors were used to enforce order and were perceived as integral to the functioning of some forced migrant communities. In these situations, violence was invisibilised, because it was an everyday reality. Some survivors talked of relatives who normalized experiences of domestic violence, sometimes recalling religious norms over time and place. For example, Samira from Iraq,

resettled in Australia, was instructed by her mother to endure years of violence to preserve her honor:

“I used to tell my mum but she would say things like “this is our religion” and “all men are like this” and “don’t tell anyone” or “don’t speak to anyone about this” and “it would ruin our reputation” and things like that...my mum made me tell her the truth and she made me swear not to say anything to anyone.” (Female, 40’s, separated, Christian, permanent protection visa, Australia)

Religiously ascribed gender and social norms also shaped attitudes toward divorce. Strict, faith-based, societal expectations that a wife to obey a husband and adhere to religious traditions of preserving a marriage, led survivors to delay their efforts to seek divorce, even in situations where they knew about their religious rights to divorce. The intersection of culture and religion clearly created much complexity in intimate partner relationships in ways which deterred victims from leaving abusive partners. For some participants beliefs concerning religious norms impeded not only divorce but even admitting that IPV was occurring. For example, Maria from Syria talked about fear of shame if she revealed her domestic violence issues:

“In our Christian culture, it considered shameful if a girl comes to her parents’ house sad due to problems with her husband, so imagine a divorce?” (Female, 50’s, widow, Christian, refugee, Sweden)

Some were also told by members of the public and various stakeholders, including the police, that divorce was unacceptable. Monira from Iraq experienced stigma around reporting physical and sexual IPV and her subsequent desire for divorce, from her family, the church and the justice system in Iraq, Turkey and Australia. She reported domestic violence to the police, who admonished her and advised that as a Christian she would be unable to seek divorce:

“He hit me once and I went to work with a black eye and I went to police station and complained about him. The police would tell me that I shouldn’t complain because Christians aren’t allowed to get divorced so there’s nothing you can do about it. The head of the police came and spoke to me eventually and said that I complain too much...” (Female, 40’s, separated, Christian, permanent protection visa, Australia).

Men were also vulnerable to different types of GBV especially at border crossings. Such violence could include emotional and physical violence intersected with religion-based discrimination. For example, Ahmed traveled from Syria to Europe through Greece described his encounter with Greek border guards. They focused upon his religious identity, but also labeled him as a member of an armed group, an action that male respondents told us occurred only to male forced migrants crossing borders. Border guards treated Muslim-looking men with suspicion and hostility, leading some respondents to conceal their religious identities due to fear of discrimination and oppression:

“I went to Greece through a truck, and the first question we were asked upon arrival was, “Are you ISIS?” and we told them, “Just because we come from Syria doesn’t mean we are ISIS, I have studied in university and graduated... The second question asked was, “Are you Muslims?” Although both of my friends were Muslim they hid that fact from them, one of them told them he is an atheist and the other said that he is Christian because he was scared of them... their (Greek guards) questions revolved around religion and they were trying to figure out if we belonged to ISIS...” (Male, 20’s, single, Muslim, refugee, Sweden)

Ahmed’s experience demonstrates that religious ideas shaping one’s religious identity can expose men to religious prejudice which involves gendered harm such as inhumane treatment, that instilled fear and emotional violence. With increased border securitisation, security personnel often conflated race, gender and religious identity, targeting groups appearing as Muslims, as part of a wider “countering-violent extremism” agenda.

3.1.1. Emerging implications

Religious beliefs were perceived by some women as assets in coping with GBV experiences. Holding tight to religious beliefs in precarious displacement served as a wellbeing anchor for many survivors and a source of confidence and resistance. Religious beliefs in some cases acted as a “protective” buffer against the gendered harms of forced migrant experiences. Conversely, religious beliefs contributed to creating an environment in which violence was normalized and forced migrant women were exposed to further harm. For example, deeply embedded religious beliefs around divorce with associated shame and stigma were exacerbated by local patriarchal social structures across migration settings. From this perspective we conceptualize religious beliefs as a “risk” factor that is often compounded across forced migration experience, as religious beliefs may manifest in different settings in various ways reinforcing or even generating GBV experiences.

3.2. Religious practices

In this section we discuss how *religious practices* interacted with experiences of GBV and forced displacement. Religious practices refer to the behaviors and rituals practiced on the basis of religious beliefs.

Respondents emphasized the crucial role of prayer during dangerous journeys and even in near-death experiences, which frequently were a result of structural violence against refugees. Some respondents recalled praying as they experienced sexual assault and/or prepared for death. Survivors used prayers to cope with everyday life and in times of uncertainty, hopelessness and powerlessness. Regular prayers were part of their daily routines and became therapeutic amid continued crisis, exposure to GBV and unresolved emotional pain. Prayers served to regulate their emotions, so they prayed to manage their traumas and worries:

“I pray, how can I do, I pray a lot, I help that’s it, in my way to manage my feelings... To cope, for myself I already pray...” (Female, refugee, Eritrea, Christian, UK)

“I prayed more than I did before, I would pray Istikharah [prayer before making a decision], and do Qiyam Al-Layl [worshipping God at night] especially starting 2 AM because I wouldn’t be able to sleep...” (Female, 30’s, divorced, Muslim, Syria, refugee, Sweden)

Prayers became an important, and for some their only, refuge. Being able to talk to God about their abuse and appeal for help offered a form of sanctuary. Having lost trust in humanity they trusted their affairs to God. Some women prayed and read the Qur’an hoping that their abusive partners would change their behavior or be removed from their lives, which in some cases may have deterred women from seeking practical support. For example, Laila from Syria experienced physical, sexual, economic and psychological IPV. She had faith however, that her invocations would be answered by God, her life would get better and justice would be served in the hereafter.

“...I mean for 13 years I spent so much time on public transport, I would carry my small Qur’an in my handbag and read it until the bus came. I would pray for God to give me the patience and I would even pray for God to bless him so that he would change and become a better person. What gave me strength was my faith, and that there’s an afterlife, and in the end, there is justice and God is with the oppressed.” (Female, 40’s, divorced, Muslim, citizen, Australia)

Several survivors said that religious practices, which for a small number of people included fasting, kept them alive and helped them manage stress and, for some, prevented them from taking their own lives. Samantha from Sierra Leone, a survivor of sexual exploitation who was waiting for a long time for an asylum decision in the UK, found reading religious scripture and praying occupied her thoughts. Her faith enabled her to have some hope for the future despite difficult circumstances:

“The time that even I give up, let me kill myself, that will be even better. But sometimes the voices that I hear can be good, some can go straight to the bible and pray about it. When there are evil thoughts come in my head, I say no, this is not my option, and I started praying... all the experiences that I got, the only thing that keep me going is the faith. I got a little bit of hope in me that there’s somebody over there that is watching over me...” (Female, divorced, Christian, Sierra Leone, asylum seeker, UK)

However, some religious practices increased risks and vulnerability to GBV. Women who had a religious marriage without a civil marriage certificate were particularly vulnerable to abuse, deprived of their legal marital rights and unable to claim their religious marital rights. Women who had participated only in a religious marriage, were not considered legally married in countries of immigration. They sometimes faced problems securing

custody of their children and access to property if they divorced in countries of refuge. The husband of Khadija, from Lebanon, was already married and did not register their subsequent religious marriage. Men like Khadija's husband used religious practice to control women and secure for themselves the benefits of marriage, but deny women's access to rights associated with the dissolution of a civil marriage.

"I don't think we even registered our marriage with the State, just Islamically... He lied to the Sheik and said that his first wife and him only recently split up. So he said to the Sheik, let me get married now and then, after a while, I'll legally divorce the other one and register this marriage but then he never did that, so he lied to the Sheik." (Female, 30's, divorced, Muslim, permanent resident, Australia)

Women who had religious marriages had to gain their husband's permission to divorce. In some cases, controlling husbands refused to cooperate. But without proof that they were divorced, some women in refuge in Turkey did not meet gendered eligibility criteria for access to welfare. Such criteria meant women had to choose between destitution and homelessness or remaining in an abusive relationship. Malika from Afghanistan described the complex legal situation she faced when trying to leave her violent husband:

"The courthouse said, "You don't have a wedding wallet, how do I know that he is your husband." I said, "I have two children, but I had an imam marriage in Afghanistan, and they do not allow the official marriage of refugees in Iran." "That wedding is invalid, you can leave him," the judge said ... I sat in front of the door, I cried; "I can't go unless I get a divorce." (Female, 30's, divorced, Muslim, international protection, Turkey)

Once in countries of refuge the local populations in non-Muslim countries tended to hold stereotypical ideas about women's religions. Those wearing a *hijab* were verbally abused or spoken to with "pity" as people assumed women were subjugated by their religion and their husbands. Respondents were dismissed as submissive with people talking to their husbands rather than them or they were urged to remove their headscarf because "you are free now." Such actions and words made women feel excluded from wider society leaving them without hope that they could successfully resettle. Widespread discrimination focused on the visible practice of wearing a headscarf made it difficult for Muslim women to find work and therefore gain independence:

"...Some told me, "There no longer is a man, you can remove it [hijab] too," but I told them, "Who told you I wore it because of a man? I put it, I want it," it's not a man that forced me to wear it... My daughter wouldn't get a summer job easily. When they see that she has a hijab on, they say, "We will get back to you," and the presence of any hijabed person in any place leads them to assume that this girl would blow-up the place... that's the effect of media." (Female, 40's, divorced, Muslim, Syria, refugee, Sweden)

Likewise, some male respondents felt that local attitudes to their religious practices stereotyped them as abusive.

3.2.1. Emerging implications

Women used religious practices as a "protective" resource which supported them emotionally to cope with GBV and forced displacement. Such practices were often therapeutic, helping women to regulate emotions and envision change, but in some cases posed as "risk" creating conditions that put survivors in danger of GBV. With an unregistered religious marriage, some women faced legal challenges in escaping abusive marriages. Also, wearing religious attire visibilised religion and could result in discrimination excluding women from work and potentially compounding their socio-economic dependency on violent partners.

3.3. Religious organization

In this section we shift our attention to focus on the interaction between *religious organization* and GBV. By religious organization we consider the ways that the organization of communities on the basis of their belief can promote resilience or reduce risks of GBV experiences. Here we also include considerations of faith communities and religious institutions.

A number of respondents talked about the important role places of worship played in their everyday experiences. Some recalled how mosques and churches offered refuge and protection from GBV during perilous journeys. For example, when Uzma and her daughters were fleeing from Afghanistan and were at risk of being kidnapped and sexually abused in Iran, she sought refuge at a mosque from where she was helped by the police.

"I heard from another Afghan that they want to sell either me or my daughters. One night one of them told me "I want to spend a night with you." I was very scared because he might do something to me or my daughters. I told my husband that we need to get away quickly. We ran away and went to a mosque... People in the mosque called the police. The police took us and helped us." (Female, 30's, married, Muslim, international protection, Turkey)

Churches were accessed by some survivors at different stages of their journey and offered refuge and support. For example, Aditu, who fled Eritrea, connected with religious groups in Greece. She felt able to trust the people involved with the church groups who assisted her with basic needs, and helped her to continue her journey to France. Wider faith communities, such as members of the church, also offered emotional and practical support to survivors. Many spoke about the meaningful social connections they made in places of worship where some found lasting friendships with people who helped them to rebuild their lives. They found religious buildings to be "a safe place" where they could forget their problems temporarily. Ines from Iraq, who had survived IPV across her migration journey, as well as violence when crossing borders, was helped by members of her church to overcome feelings of guilt after leaving her husband:

"I was feeling bad for leaving [my husband] and they told me that I hadn't done anything bad. They said that we see you come to Church every Sunday and you bring the kids, and your son is so well-behaved, so we know you're not the kind

of woman who doesn't care about your family... you are very family focused and that it's good that you left him, because you had to." (Female, 40's, divorced, Christian, refugee, Australia)

Faith communities offered practical help such as providing shelter or running activities such as teaching language or reading religious scriptures which provided distraction from past traumas and helped to restore survivors' sense of self-worth.

A significant proportion of survivors spoke about their interactions and reliance on religious leaders such as priests and imams who lent them support. Some survivors relied on scholarly and practical assistance from religious leaders both in country of origin (e.g., Syria) and in refuge (e.g., in Australia). Religious leaders were reported on several occasions to have defended women's rights and tried to reform abusive spouses by sharing religious guidance, although on the whole these interventions were said to make little difference to abusers' behavior. Laila from Syria experienced IPV over many years, which worsened following arrival in Australia. She recalled how she relied on advice of imams from the mosques in her countries of origin and refuge. The Imams condemned her abusive husbands' actions and drew on the Islamic tradition to convince her husband to agree to divorce.

"Yeh and there were even Sheikh's who got involved—both in Syria and here. They would say "don't hit her, this isn't our religion, this isn't humane, this isn't mercy" and he [husband] would say "I'm sorry, I won't do it again" and they would believe him, and I would believe him... the Sheik here in Australia didn't know about our issues... only the Sheik in Syria knew. I told him my story and he said to him "yeah, where do you think you're living? You can't force her to live with you. There's no religion where the woman is forced to live with a man. ... You have to get a divorce—God doesn't say that and neither this religion nor any religion would accept what you are doing, it's inhumane" and in the end he agreed to a divorce." (Female, 40's, divorced, Muslim, citizen, Australia)

In some instances, GBV survivors found respite in places of worship associated with a different religion than their own, developing a new sense of belonging through religious conversion. Respondents spoke of their transformation offering a renewed sense of self and wellbeing. Religious conversion operated as a rupture to harmful social interactions and norms encountered previously. Fatma from Iran had survived IPV and enforced isolation. She converted from Islam and found acceptance and support among the Jehovah Witness community in England which helped her to reevaluate her life.

"She invited me to the church. I went there and I liked the way they approached difficulties, and the way they pray. It makes you feel calm, make you feel I'm not alone, why should I be depressed, there are lots of reasons to be happy, since then I feel much comforted and much relaxed, and also I like the way they approach... women and kids, and the way they behave, their attitude, I like that more than us, the Arab culture, and all those beliefs. Also, maybe my attitude is kind of the same, more in forgiveness... in ways of Jehovah's Witness

they are teaching you have to forgive people, you have to be calm, whatever you do God knows..." (Female, 30's, divorced, Christian, citizen, UK)

While some respondents in the UK described help received from co-religious affiliates, some complained about the difficulties they experienced accessing religious alms. For instance, Sonia from Algeria, an IPV survivor who received death threats from her husband if she filed for divorce, did not get support from local faith communities and considered her treatment as discrimination:

"We even applied for Zakat [support from a religious tax] Can you imagine? It's ridiculous; they didn't even call us back. The number of Muslims that give Zakat in London - I'm not even talking about the whole country—it's a huge number. I mean, even asking for a small aid from the Zakat fund... when they know that you're from North Africa, they be like, "What are you even doing in this country?" (Female, 70's, separated, Muslim, undocumented, UK)

There were also accounts of religious organizations and religious leaders being a risk factor. Some religious leaders were insufficiently versed in women's rights enshrined in religious teachings. In some women's narratives in Australia, leaders drew on discriminatory gendered norms within their religious communities to encourage them to endure IPV and stay in abusive relationships to preserve their family. We also heard accounts from a number of women whose partners would try to influence religious leaders' attitudes toward their wives, by inventing lies about their morals and trying to convince the religious leaders to side with them in order to silence their wives.

3.3.1. Emerging implications

Religious organizations in many cases served as important "protective" factors, and as such a lifeline for many displaced women, as places of practical assistance, social connection and emotional support from peers and religious leaders. Yet, at times religious leaders encouraged survivors to endure violence and stay in abusive relationships to protect what they perceived as religiously sanctioned family values.

3.4. Religious experience

Finally, we consider how *religious experience* and GBV interacted. By religious experience we refer to the metaphysical experiences that religion may incite in believers. Respondents did not describe religious experiences in detail although some interesting themes were identified.

Survivors repeatedly reported feeling empowered and protected by God in crisis situations. The bonds with the church for Christian respondents and with the Qur'an among Muslim respondents, empowered survivors who relied on these religious resources. For example, Junda a rape survivor from Eritrea found attending church every week a source of empowerment:

“...[on] Sunday and Saturday I go to my church when I meet different people, when I have listened to God’s words you know, it makes me more powerful.” (Female, single, asylum seeker, Christian, UK)

Some respondents talked about believing God responded to their prayers saying they had experienced God’s touch in their lives, for example when surviving risky journeys. Many praised God for supporting them and expressed their gratitude for their lives being spared. As another rape victim put it:

“So, I’d thank God for staying alive.” (Female, 20’s, single, Christian, Eritrea, asylum seeker, UK)

Conversely, two transgender respondents recalled having hostile religious experiences at different stages of their lives and migration journey. While they believed that God designed them with their gender identity, they felt ostracized and condemned by faith communities, pushing them to rely on their personal faith and distance themselves from communal practices. For example, Sam was subjected to multiple communal religious practices, such as gender conversion exorcism prayers by members of his local church and in a refugee camp which created for him a negative spiritual experience. As a result, discriminatory communal religious practices targeting his gender identity over time and place led him to develop a religious experience of spiritual struggles in which he felt a fear of God and was deterred from ever approaching a church.

“The biggest shock was that my mom took me to Church to pray, they called me for prayer and I came, then they put their hands on my shoulders, and prayed above me while reciting, “Let N enter here and you leave as a male.” It was a shock to me because we’re in 2019, and there’s still a lot in Europe who believe this is a legal way, where in camps there are people who would “Pray the gay away” transform someone from being gay to straight...I am what I am. They had a lot of hatred and upheaval toward us. I could never think now, that I can enter a church in the way that I am by nature. I’m filled with fear, that’s what they taught us in religion, that God is scary, harsh and unfair.” (Female, transgender, 20’s, single, Christian, refugee, Sweden)

Moreover, some respondents who had fled from Syria and Iraq described that living in Daesh (ISIS) occupied areas ruptured their religious experience by enforcing different religious beliefs and rituals with associated highly restrictive and discriminatory gender norms. The occupation limited their religious freedom violating their religious experiences by daily challenging their core religious beliefs and practices and threatening their lives.

3.4.1. Emerging implications

While religious experiences were described as “empowering” by survivors of faith and as such can be conceptualized as a “protective” religious resource they also presented as a “risk” factor that could disempower survivors of GBV through feelings of ostracization, which were reported to have been the “cause of

spiritual struggles” for some women. Religion is a powerful resource that can serve to empower, disempower and shape experiences of GBV and forced migration.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Although respondents were not specifically questioned about religion in relation to their experiences of forced displacement and GBV, 58 respondents raised the importance of religion, supporting claims made elsewhere about the significant role religion play in forced migrants’ everyday lives (cf. [Strang et al., 2020](#); [Pertek, 2022b](#)). Our analysis demonstrated that religion interacted with GBV in forced migration in multiple ways that, at times, generated increased “risks” or vulnerability to abuse but also served as a “protective” factor that was used as a coping and recovery mechanism. The adoption of an intersectional feminist lens, informed by a social constructivist standpoint, centered our analysis largely on “personalized” religion experiences. Our work highlights the importance of applying such a lens in the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of policy and practice to support forced migrant survivors of SGBV.

This paper fills an important gap in gender and forced migration scholarship, bringing several unique empirical and theoretical contributions. It is one of the very few papers documenting the interactions between religion and experiences of GBV in forced displacement which demonstrates the relevance and importance of acknowledging the role of religion. While substantial evidence on the religion and GBV nexus comes from international development and non-migrant settings, our paper demonstrates that religion travels with survivors as they flee across fragile and precarious settings. We considered how in forced displacement religion can both present as both a “risk” and “protective” factor, supporting and/or undermining survivors wellbeing by exposing them to further vulnerability and risk of GBV. Our analysis points to the role of religion for survivors on the move and in refuge, over time and place, enabling us to theorize gender and forced migration through the lens of religion. Religion was often the only sanctuary and resilience mechanism available to forced migrants following inter-personal and structural violence, including through lengthy periods of precarity and destitution. Religious resources constituted the foundation of their resilience and sense of self, serving as an important “protective” factor (cf. [Veronese et al., 2019](#); [Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2020](#)). Conversely, in terms of “risk,” religion also served as a vulnerability factor deeply embedded into social norms and personal cognition at an inter/personal, community and societal level. Religious beliefs and practices could reinforce existing patriarchal structures and increase vulnerability to abuse, subsequently undermining healing and wellbeing.

In terms of religious ideas, survivors relied on personal religious beliefs and rituals as a “protective” psychological buffer that helped with distress and anxiety. Such findings are congruent with earlier studies in displacement settings, for example in Kenya ([Parsitau, 2011](#)). Survivors felt they were supported by God, found meaning for their experiences in their religious beliefs and invoked God for help. A number of respondents deployed their religious beliefs and knowledge as a resistance tool to stand up for their rights against perpetrators of GBV. Conversely, some respondents with negative

patterns of religious coping felt punished and abandoned by God, which often exacerbated psychological distress. Such “risk” factors associated with negative religious coping in displacement require further research to inform mental health interventions. Survivors’ accounts have also shown how wider religious beliefs and cultural practices serve as a “risk” factor that shapes experience of forced migration and GBV. Religious beliefs could uphold patriarchal social norms in the form of victim blaming and the tolerance of violence (Jakobsen, 2016).

Similarly, religious practices such as prayers helped many participants to find temporary respite in conversations with God giving them the opportunity to share their hopes and fears, strengthening their resilience through their use of religious practices as a “protective” resource. Yet, although upholding faith and prayers helped survivors to cope at times, they might have reduced their opportunities to take more proactive steps to find safety, as they trusted God to make violence stop (Pertek, 2021). Thus as Swart (2013) describes, faith in GBV survival can operate as a palliative measure delaying survivors’ help-seeking. In addition, religious practices such as wearing religious attire compounded gendered religious discrimination and social exclusion. Religion-related “risks” operated in interaction with other factors, as religion is constructed by issues of power, politics and social identity (Wessells and Strang, 2006). The data indicated that the deprivation of basic rights and needs compounded the detrimental effects of religious practices that operated in this context as “risks” to GBV. For example, structural harms generated by hostile immigration policies, such as lack of housing and right to work for asylum seekers, religious discrimination against women wearing *hijab* and community tolerance of domestic abuse based on religious (mis)beliefs, could compound “risks” and accumulative harms in the lives of GBV survivors.

Likewise, in terms of religious organization, some Christian and Muslim faith leaders supported women’s rights to divorce, illustrating the potential they can offer as a “protective” resource as part of a wider protection system. Among Christian respondents, friendships and emotional support received from members of churches were crucial in moments of crisis and acted as an ongoing “protective” anchor that had positive impacts on well-being. Social connections built in places of worship could offer opportunities for the rupture of violence and exclusion. Yet, survivors faced barriers in accessing religious communal resources and some religious leaders advised women against exiting violent marriages which exposed them to further “risk” of GBV. Religious experiences, inspired by religious beliefs and practices, served as “protective” factor from which survivors drew motivation, empowerment and protection in perilous forced migrant routes. In summary, religion manifested itself as a mixed blessing in gender and forced migration, as a “protective” resource and at times a “risk” factor that had direct implications on their experiences of forced migration and GBV. Such findings indicated women’s experiences of forced migration clearly intersects with religion by compounding trauma and vulnerability to gendered religious discrimination stemming from patriarchal power relations embedded in religious (mis)beliefs, practices and structures.

Conceptualizing religious resources using Ter Haar’s (2011) framework enabled the different influences of religion on

GBV come to light. Our analysis has provided insight into the way religion intersect with experiences of GBV and forced migration in both positive and negative ways. We demonstrated the interconnectivity between different “protective” religious resources that cut across the religious resource domains and similarity in the way on which “risk” factors intersect with each of the domains. We have demonstrated how multiple resources could exacerbate vulnerability to abuse, as a “risk” or could support survivors’ recovery, acting as a “protection” resource. We identified complex interactions between GBV and religion, documenting that religion is an important consideration for GBV and forced migration research and practice. Our paper thus builds on Ter Haar’s framework through the integration of “protective” and “risk” considerations in our conceptualization of religion resources. We show that religious resources (both personal and communal) as protective factors combined, forming religious coping mechanisms of survivors (e.g., personal prayers, beliefs, attending church etc.), while religious resources as risk factors conspired at times in increasing displaced people’s vulnerability to violence and discrimination. We have also highlighted important finding concerning the institutionalization of religion. We note that although particular religious resources stemmed from institutionalized religion, participants referred to faith and non-institutionalized religion as the main source of their strength, indicating that religious resources can transcend religious institutions.

Our conceptual framework also offers important practical and policy implications. Religious resources as both “protective” and “risk” factors operated as triggers that can bring about both opportunities and barriers for GBV prevention and response. The opportunities relate to resilience and protection of survivors and communities and potential for resistance can be integrated into programme designs. The barriers and threats (posed by religious resources as risk) require professionals to build capacities to prevent, mitigate and respond to such risks. Positive religious coping strategies represent a range of opportunities to aid survivor’s recovery that could be more widely recognized and supported by practitioners to help survivors strengthen their personal coping strategies, whilst at the same time identifying ways to mitigate negative religious coping and “spiritual struggles.” We therefore call for greater recognition of the potential of religion in service provision and the need for more interventions that build upon forced migrant communities, religious assets. We have shown how both individual and communal religious resources, e.g., religious beliefs and organizations, mattered greatly in individual’s lived experiences of GBV in forced migration. The value of faith-based networks in terms of nurturing enduring and trusting relationships should also be recognized by practitioners as an available but often untapped resource to forced migrant survivors of faith.

Practitioners in immigration contexts might explore approaches to working with religious leaders and local faith communities to support the protection of forced migrants and reduce risks of GBV and associated harms. Given the important role religious leaders played in some survivors’ lives, we suggest that efforts be made to develop their capacities

and referral pathways between religious organizations/places of worship and specialized GBV organizations, integrating religious actors into wider protection and support systems. More programmes are needed in immigration contexts to sensitize religious leaders and religious organizations to GBV and the specific needs and vulnerabilities of forced migrant victims, and to work on community engagement mechanisms that can develop survivors' agency and ability to mobilize to respond to their own needs. Religion, as a factor, should not be ignored, sidelined or underestimated in GBV intervention but recognized as a factor in the violence continuum. It may be possible to scale up faith-sensitive solutions to addressing GBV when working with survivors and perpetrators offering the potential to shift from individual coping mechanisms to the development of pathway of support to protection, integration and social justice.

Finally, our paper documents the complex manifestations of religion in experiences of GBV among displaced survivors in the UK, Sweden, Turkey and Australia but more work is needed. We have outlined key themes which indicate areas for future research and which may be generalisable to other settings. Further research is required to understand how religious experience shapes survivors' resilience and vulnerability, beyond Christianity and Islam.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the sensitive nature of the data means that there are ethical requirements stipulating data cannot be shared. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to SP, s.m.pertek.1@bham.ac.uk.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee (Humanities and Social Science). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Author contributions

The paper was originally conceptualized and written by SP in communication with JP. SP, KB, PH, and JH analyzed the data and were involved in data collection. KB, LG, and JP edited and provided feedback on the paper. JP was project lead for the overall project. LG lead for the UK case study and KB co-lead of the Australian study. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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