

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, DISPLACEMENT, AND RELIGION

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Sandra Pertek

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Preface

Writing this book was a profound journey into the world of women who were forced to flee their homes due to wars and crises. It was not an easy exploration—full of contradictions and difficult material documenting injustice and oppression. Nor was it a fast research pathway, but it was a deeply rewarding experience; the women I met continue to inspire my work and motivate me to stand in solidarity with those whose voices may go unheard.

Behind every story of displacement is the silence of suffering, and faith and resilience speaking louder than despair. I am aware that the women I had the privilege to meet only revealed to me a window into their lives and so much more could not be expressed in words. Still, we came together and shared our interactions based on humanity, humility and hope for a better tomorrow. Our faith often connected us, too.

I wrote this book to challenge widespread misconceptions about religion in relation to violence against women (VAW). Too often, religion is misread, flattened or blamed for women's suffering. Yet the realities I encountered tell a more complex story—one in which faith can be a source of fortitude as well as a source of struggle.

I did not know what women would tell me when I began. Their stories—raw, painful and deeply human—redirected the trajectory of my research. I quickly discovered that amid the weight of unresolved pain lies a paradox: a capacity for extraordinary strength and survival. Because to witness unresolved pain is to glimpse the hidden shape of resilience.

Since 2018, I have wrestled with questions that shaped this work and, at times, kept me company through late nights and crowded airports: How do we navigate violence and displacement in a world that often overlooks women's voices? How do we turn noise about religion contributing to violence into a constructive dialogue for protection? The answers did not arrive as theories. They came as stories.

I sought to listen, and to build bridges between research, policy and practice. What women shared with me far exceeded any neat categories: stories of resilience and suffering, of hope and despair, of faith as both a resource and a challenge. These voices form the foundation of this book.

I must confess, I did not plan to write a book. I was asked to carry a trust. The pages that follow are an attempt to honour it—with analysis rooted in practice, and practice guided by evidence. VAW remains one of the critical global challenges spreading across borders and systems. To save lives, new paradigms for theory, policy and practice in the face of global displacement are needed—now, more urgently than ever. As global displacement grows amid protracted conflicts,

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climate-related mobility and human-made disasters—and as women's rights face alarming rollbacks—this book seeks to contribute to solutions that address violence against those forced to flee, especially women who are disproportionately affected.

I hope that this book will land on the night tables of changemakers and will not let them sleep until the bureaucratic machinery of humanitarian, migration and religious systems starts moving in the right direction to protect women's lives. The very systems designed for women's protection—multiple human rights mechanisms, humanitarian and migration systems—might undergo major transformation to create more inclusive humanitarian futures. Clearly women's diverse experiences in this book are connected by their experiences of systems that failed to protect them. Here comes the unexplored place of religion in addressing women's crises, which I endeavour to uncover in this volume.

In some humanitarian spaces I have worked in, secularised frameworks have marginalised the worldviews and faith needs of affected populations, eschewing religious orientation and ignoring the worldview of those they sought to help. Stigma around religion permeated the microcosm of humanitarian work. I also observed intersectionality being narrowed to 'gender-only' approaches, diluting attention to intersecting identities—including religion, as though gender could exist in isolation. In the haste to save lives, the complex interplay of social relations and identities shaping vulnerability and privilege was often overlooked.

Authors who inspired me to undertake this research direction include Elena Fiddian-Qasmieyah, Alistair Ager and Elżbieta Goździak, who advocate for integrating spiritual and cultural sensitivity into refugee assistance—seeing it as essential for restoring dignity and fostering recovery, not just meeting survival needs. As you will see in the unfolding chapters, intersectional, socioecological and resilience theories inspired me to experiment and connect these approaches to achieve a stronger conceptual framework for understanding lived experiences of religion and its ambiguity.

Having explored how women experience violence and displacement—where suffering was often deeply embedded in spiritual dimensions and faith provided coping mechanisms—this book represents for me a foundation for exploring responses to displacement also embedded in religious and spiritual contexts. But these will be topics to venture into in future books, as I work on connecting mainstream and faith-inspired approaches to aid, to improve outcomes for women.

In future research to develop systematic protection solutions, it is important to continue exploring diverse migratory routes across different religions and return migration as the number of returnees to many post-conflict areas is growing. An integrated intersectional and ecological framework proves to be a flexible framework which can be utilised in future studies across diverse social groups and stages of forced migration.

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Before you turn the page, I invite you to pause and consider the unseen journeys of millions of women across borders and across loss and new beginnings whose lives are shaped by displacement. I invite you to engage compassionately with their stories which this book seeks to honour. Let the silence between the lines speak.

In solidarity and faith

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Acronyms

AGD	Age, Gender and Diversity
COR	Conservation of Resources
CORR	Conservation of Religious Resources
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
DGMM	Directorate General of Migration Management (Türkiye)
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net (EU-funded cash assistance in Türkiye)
EU	European Union
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GIFR	Global Islamic Fund for Refugees
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Negative Religious Coping
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PD	Psychological Distress
PRC	Positive Religious Coping
PTGI	Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RCOPE	Religious Coping Scale
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SuTP	Syrians under Temporary Protection
TPD	Temporary Protection Directive (EU)
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

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PART 1

RETHINKING VIOLENCE, DISPLACEMENT AND RELIGION

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1
Why religion matters in violence against displaced women

'It's in the Mediterranean Sea that I saw people drowning . . . I am not a good swimmer, but that day I had the strength to swim and to even save another life. Just in front of me I saw people going down and never coming up again . . . God has a reason for me to stay alive . . .' (Ayesha, in her 30s, originally from Sierra Leone, then in Medenine, Tunisia)

Introduction

The ever-increasing number of forcibly displaced people is a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. Displacement doubled between 2013 and 2023 and continues to rise due to armed conflicts, disasters and climate emergencies.[1] This book explores the intersection of religion, violence against women (VAW) and displacement. Religion travels with survivors across borders, shaping their experiences of VAW throughout the displacement journey. This chapter begins with the voices of women whose faith sustained them through conflict, perilous journeys and uncertain refuge. Ayesha's story, illustrated in Appendix 1, exemplifies the gaps between individual experience and provision of protection, and the disconnects between different sectors in addressing VAW. These disconnects affect millions of women and girls worldwide.

Fleeing community violence in West Africa after resisting female genital mutilation (FGM) through a lengthy pan-African route, Ayesha endured sexual trafficking and multiple failed sea crossings from Libya. Despite unspeakable hardship, religion remained central to her coping. Personal beliefs and covert prayers enabled her to find meaning and resilience amid exploitation and loss, yet they also gave rise to spiritual struggles—questions about her standing before God following experiences of abuse. While she entrusted her life to the divine, she received no support from local religious leaders nor any faith community during her transit and temporary refuge in displacement. She attributed her survival from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea and sexual trafficking to the will of God,

[1] By late 2022, a staggering 120 million people were displaced worldwide—19 million more than in the previous year (UNHCR, 2023).

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and remotely sought spiritual guidance from a religious leader overseas to overcome the spiritual struggles which emerged during her experience of exploitation. She continued to pray, fast and read religious scriptures. Eventually, she gave life to twins born of sexual violence. Yet even in refuge, racism and restricted access to services compounded her vulnerability while living in limbo for years, until eventual resettlement to a Scandinavian country, a rare outcome among millions awaiting durable solutions.[2] Faith was central to her coping and survival strategies—the (un)institutionalised aspects of religion—her personal religious beliefs and practices—sustained her. Her story is about the invisible elements of lived experiences often overlooked by mainstream humanitarian actors.

This book unpacks those blind spots, arguing that it is critical to further engage with religion, as an integral part of women's experiences of displacement, to unlock available resources including spiritual, moral, emotional and financial, for strengthening protection. A growing body of scholarship highlights the exclusion of religious considerations and actors in humanitarian and development responses (Ager, 2015; Wilkinson, 2018; Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). The modern humanitarian system has largely relegated religion to the private sphere of human experience (Ager and Ager, 2011) and espoused a secular approach to alleviating suffering, despite its inherently spiritual dimensions (Goździak and Shandy, 2002). In short, the challenge that has emerged in the humanitarian sector is that, by being silent on the subject of religion and by avoiding religion, the sector has imposed secular values on the populations it helps, reinforcing liberal materialism. According to Ager and Ager:

> '. . . [*t*]*he secular framing of the humanitarian regime marginalises religious practice and experience in the conceptualisation of humanitarian action at both global and local levels. Further, such framing serves to privilege certain liberal materialist assumptions . . . representing a form of neo-colonialism . . .*' (2011:457)

Secular interpretations of humanitarian principles inadvertently impose narrow, neo-liberal interpretations and secular ideology on crises-affected communities. Functional secularism involves the *privatisation, marginalisation and instrumentalisation* of religion in the humanitarian worldview (Ager and Ager, 2015: 12). Privatisation entails downgrading religion and faith as a personal matter. Marginalisation involves avoiding religious issues and actors in humanitarian operations. Instrumentalisation means that religious actors are often used to benefit the humanitarian aims of secular agencies, such as for fundraising and gaining acceptance of local communities (ibid). A number of studies point to the

[2] In 2023, only 188,800 refugees were resettled globally, representing around 10% of those who need it, according to UNHCR (2025), but places shrink yearly. In 2025, 2.5 million awaited resettlement.

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instrumentalisation and marginalisation of religion in humanitarian and development practice (Le Roux et al., 2016; Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011; Rakodi, 2011; Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler, 2020). While the complexity and importance of religious engagement around VAW and, more generally, gender-based violence (GBV) are acknowledged (Marshall et al., 2021; Le Roux and Pertek, 2022), little is known about how humanitarian practitioners approach religion in their work.

Over the last three decades, two substantive schools of thought have emerged concerning gender and forced migration, and religion and forced migration, which respectively consider how gender and religion shape the experiences of displacement. Yet, there is little scholarship concerning the intersection between these schools and the three dimensions they have in common. Consequently, the complex relationships between gendered experiences of forced migration and religion have been under-theorised, despite important and extensive scholarship by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (e.g. 2014, 2016, 2017 and more) who has closely examined the gender, religion and forced migration nexus. Humanitarian practitioners often implicitly associate religious communities with patriarchy. Secular communities, by contrast, tend to be viewed as free from oppressing frameworks and practices and as well-positioned to challenge women's disempowerment. This poses an important question:

> '. . . *whether secular frameworks and institutions are necessarily the best means of addressing SGBV* [sexual and gender-based violence] *in displacement settings, or if there is a place for religious identity, belief and practice in such processes and contexts?*' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2017: 131)

This book furthers this enquiry within a shifting humanitarian landscape, offering empirical insights based on fieldwork with refugee communities in Türkiye and Tunisia and with multiple humanitarian organisations globally. Situated at the intersections of gender, religion and forced displacement, it challenges the exclusion of religion from humanitarian approaches to addressing VAW because this exclusion overlooks the significance of religion in lived experiences of many people worldwide. Eight in ten people identified with a religious affiliation in 2010 (PEW, 2010). While projections suggest this figure may decline to around six in ten by 2050, regional variance and the growth of certain religions (e.g. Islam) indicate that religious influences will remain substantial (PEW, 2022), especially in the context of a simultaneous return to religion, growing spirituality and increasing secularisation in different regions (Schliesser, 2023; PEW, 2022). Together, these trends reinforce the relevance of exploring religious influences to address VAW and displacement.

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Violence against women: a global challenge

VAW remains one of the most persistent and underfunded global challenges in humanitarian contexts. Around one in three women worldwide are affected by physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner or by sexual violence from a non-partner, with varying lifetime prevalence across regions (WHO, 2021). For example, approximately 31% of women in North Africa and Middle East, and between 27% and 44% of women across regions of Sub-Saharan Africa (ibid) are subjected to abuse. In displacement, VAW increases due to myriad factors, such as loss of resources and social connections, language and legal barriers. The prevalence of VAW in emergencies remains unknown and depends on context, as data is unavailable due to stigma, fear of disclosure and hard-to-reach populations. But anecdotal data narrates a drastic increase in VAW in displacement. A study from Belgium and the Netherlands found that 69.3% of women and, in comparison, 28.6% of men migrants experienced sexual violence after their arrival in Europe (Keygnaert et al., 2012).

Humanitarian responses are constantly underfunded and often fail to protect women from violence (Marsh and Blake, 2019), creating a silent emergency of endemic proportions that costs the world economy billions. Deepening fiscal constraints have been driven by shifts in the foreign aid policies of global powers and the decline of major aid agencies and earlier budget cuts to foreign policy made by Western governments, such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK and the US (Chaudhry, 2025). In addition, on the one hand, democratic recession, repressive governments and authoritarian resurgence generate barriers to foreign aid NGOs' operations in various countries, with administrative crackdowns introducing laws hindering access, advocacy and funding (such as in Russia, China and Georgia). An increasing anti-NGO rhetoric threatens aid delivery across regions. On the other hand, Western governments restrict NGOs working with migrants cross border (such as Italy and Poland). With humanitarian funding gaps expanding, there is a growing need to draw on alternative resources, including private, philanthropic and religious contributions.

Moreover, the sector is confronted by geopolitical conditionality in humanitarian access, exemplified by the rise of far-right initiatives promoting nationalism and restricting immigration policies. Other challenges include limitations on gender and diversity policies which have rendered cuts in sexual and reproductive health programmes worldwide with devastating consequences on displaced women's health and access to protection. Double standards in the application of international refugee law exacerbate displacement challenges, whereby some nations are seen as more deserving of aid and protection than others (Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2023). For example, special measures for Ukrainians in

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Europe show differentiated treatment from that shown to people from other conflict-torn countries such as Syria, Sudan, Gaza and Yemen.[3]

Shifting the humanitarian paradigms

This book aims to critically analyse the influences of religion on VAW and displacement in order to inspire and inform strategic religious engagement in public policy and humanitarian practice. It draws on interdisciplinary analysis integrating studies of gender, religion, refugees and forced migration, humanitarianism, international relations, sociology, anthropology and psychology. It offers conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions, advancing intersectionality, socioecology and religious resources theory. In doing so, it bridges the gaps between humanitarian, migration and religious systems, advancing conceptual and methodological innovations to strengthen systematic protection and address VAW effectively.

I approach religion in pragmatic and hybrid terms, exploring what religion does and what religion is in women's lives. Theological commentary falls beyond the scope of this book.

This work therefore aims to be of use to readers from all backgrounds, including those from diverse religious traditions, those without any religious affiliation, and individuals with varying levels of religious literacy.

While a secular framework underpins the contemporary humanitarian system (Davey et al., 2013; Ager and Ager, 2015; Rysaback-Smith, 2016), it is widely recognised that historically humanitarian responses were religiously motivated. Originating from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) established in 1863,[4] the international humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence are perceived as a neutral basis for providing humanitarian aid. The UN General Assembly (1991, 2004) adopted these principles to guide humanitarian action, alongside key provisions of international humanitarian law—most notably the 1949 Geneva Conventions. The Geneva Conventions themselves are not exclusive of religious engagement; for example, they protect the right to religious practices and access to religious items for persons affected by armed conflict.

[3] The Temporary Protection Directive (TPD 2001/55/EC) was an immediate protection mechanism for refugees from Ukraine in March 2022 (extended until 2026) which enables Ukrainian refugees to have access to housing, work, and social and health services. Such measures have never been granted to refugees from across Africa or the Middle East in the EU.

[4] The founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) marks the inception of institutionalised humanitarianism, followed by the Ottoman Red Crescent Society in 1868 and the League of Red Cross Societies in 1919.

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Complex webs of actors, ideologies and structures, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary politics, perform humanitarian actions often driven by narratives of salvation and liberation (De Lauri, 2021). These largely reflect Western modes of charitable giving—particularly secularised Christian traditions (caritas)—rooted in Jewish and Greco-Roman thought, with less relevance to other faith traditions which encompass other ways of doing good (Hughes and Siddiqui, 2024). There is no single definition of *humanitarianism*. Broadly, it refers to actions aimed at alleviating suffering and addressing global inequalities (De Lauri, 2021), a notion that resonates with the ethical foundations of many world religions. Humanitarian actors provide life-saving assistance during emergencies such as conflicts or natural disasters. Development agencies, in turn, address structural inequalities such as poverty and governance to promote a socio-economic transformation.

While humanitarian and development organisations often present themselves as neutral actors driven by noble missions, they are often embedded in political structures and power relations that shape their interventions and outcomes (Mcloughlin et al., 2024). Aid programmes have historically been shaped by geopolitical interests and donor priorities that often reproduce inequalities rather than dismantle them. Aid is frequently used as a tool of political influence, benefitting donor and recipient elites through selective aid delivery, conditionality and the marginalisation of local actors (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; DuBois & Healy, 2024). Within this context, VAW both increases during emergencies and compounds the impacts of emergencies—impacts which undermine women's access to assistance, participation and accountability.

In some cases humanitarianism has served as a vehicle for soft power and as a political weapon (to influence regimes), reinforcing global hierarchies under the guise of benevolence; the notion of neutrality itself has been critiqued as a myth that obscures the political nature of aid (Weiss, 1999). For instance, Western aid agencies poured substantial resources into NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s that became important providers of aid in the Balkans and Rwanda. Over decades, with the growth of NGOs headquartered in the North—replicating global unequal power dynamics (Chaudhry, 2025)—questions emerged concerning their accountability to the local recipients of aid.

Recent shifts in humanitarian policy such as the 'localisation of aid' agenda from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) created space for further religious engagement, especially with faith leaders from crisis-affected communities (Carpi, 2023). Aiming for more contextually grounded responses, major donors and humanitarian organisations formalised localisation as a core commitment under the Grand Bargain, an agreement designed to enhance the

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efficiency of humanitarian aid by the inclusion of local actors—especially those from the Global South—in crisis response (Robillard et al., 2021; Barbelet et al., 2021). While these frameworks opened policy space for religious actors, meaningful inclusion in co-ordination mechanisms remains constrained by structural inequalities. On the one hand, mainstream humanitarian institutions often privilege Western, technocratic knowledge systems, sidelining religious epistemologies and local knowledge and spiritual understandings of suffering, healing and justice (Wilkinson et al., 2022). Secular humanitarian frameworks often struggle to accommodate religious epistemologies, leading to epistemic silencing and missed opportunities for collaboration with religious actors (Olivier, 2016; Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). On the other hand, localisation efforts risk instrumentalising religious engagement for geopolitical gains and may be guided by symbolic reasons—such as gaining community trust or legitimacy—but without sharing decision-making power (Le Roux et al., 2016; Olivier, 2016). International actors may question the neutrality or inclusivity of religious organisations which can lead to blanket exclusions that ignore diversity and nuance within religious communities (Swart and Nell, 2016).

Another shift is the 'humanitarian reset' announced in 2025 which marks a critical juncture in the evolution of the global humanitarian system. It is a major reform initiative responding to deep-rooted structural, financial and legitimacy crises. This reset is not merely a reaction to immediate funding shortfalls but is also an urgent attempt to restructure how humanitarian aid is delivered in an increasingly complex multipolar world. Unlike previous waves of reform, the 2025 reset is a defensive response to the existential threats posed to the humanitarian sector after significant downsizing in humanitarian agencies. For instance, UNHCR has announced a 30% reduction in global staffing costs, including the closure of offices and termination of thousands of posts (UN, 2025a and 2025b). The sector is being forced to hyper-prioritise life-saving interventions and streamline operations under severe constraints. This is not the first reset in humanitarian history; previous shifts included the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) paradigm, the post-Cold War liberal aid expansion, and the creation of co-ordination mechanisms such as Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in the early 1990s (Slim, 2025).

Against this backdrop, both localisation and the humanitarian reset offer a unique opportunity to engage with the religious resources of displaced populations and with faith-based actors. This chapter goes on to argue that such engagement is critical for addressing persistent violence against displaced women, because religion is central to both their vulnerability and their resilience.

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Gender and forced migration

Global forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, exceeding 120 million people in 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Displacement is an increasingly feminised process, with women constituting around half of displaced populations. Women and children often undertake perilous refugee journeys, without male relatives, due to conflict and war, climate emergencies and economic inequalities. While violence spares no one, women and girls are disproportionally subjected to increased risks and incidents of gender-based violence (GBV), including structural and interpersonal violence along forced migration routes (Freedman, 2016; Pertek et al., 2022). Forced migrant men and boys are also vulnerable (WRC, 2020). With ruptured social networks, lack of financial resources, language skills and documentation, displaced women face multiple risks and many experience a continuum of violence across forced migrant routes and in places of refuge (Krause, 2015; Canning, 2017; Pertek and Phillimore, 2022).

Feminist and gender studies of forced migration show that there have been refugee policy shifts over the years, moving from women's exclusion and *invisibilisation* to women's inclusion. These have taken place in parallel with shifting gender approaches in development studies (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). From the criticised Women in Development (WID)[5] paradigm, redressing women's exclusion in socio-economic development frameworks and Women and Development (WAD)[6], emphasising women's exploitation in development frameworks to the Gender and Development (GAD)[7] paradigm which focused on both women and men and transformative approaches to development (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). Similar changes in policy frameworks and theories occurred in forced migration studies; including mainly conceptualising refugees as men in the 1960s/1970s; Women in Forced Migration (WIFM) in the mid-1980s and 1990s focusing on women-specific measures in displacement; and Gender and Forced Migration (GAFM) promoting gender-mainstreaming measures, which in practice meant women-focussed mainstreaming (Indra, 2008). The GAFM paradigm from late 1990s/2000s accounts for gendered processes of forced migration, i.e. the impacts of changing household dynamics (gender roles and relations) on

[5] WID evolved in the 1970s–1980s from focus on equity in the private and economic spheres, and empowerment from 1970s, to WID efficiency in the 1980s–1990s which focused on maximizing women's productivity, eventually leading to burdening women with the triple gender role (productive, reproductive and community management), reinforcing gender inequalities (Carolyn, 2000). WID's analysis focused on women and their practical needs.

[6] WAD from 1970s explored the interaction between women and development. WAD also pointed to the intersections between different identities and power structures, and similarly to WID, centred women in development.

[7] GAD emerged in the late 1980s/1990s. As an alternative paradigm, it focused on transformative approaches to economics, welfare and human rights. GAD's analysis focused on household and gender relations and recognized strategic gender needs of women, girls, men and boys (Moser, 1993). However, GAD discourse is perceived by feminist activists as failed due to slow progress (Rao and Kelleher, 2005; Istratii, 2020).

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access to protection, and is sensitive to the power structures between providers and recipients of refugee assistance. International organisations mandated with refugee protection started to engage with the concept of *gender-related persecution* and developed the first *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women* (UNHCR, 1991). Nonetheless, women remain marginalised by the implementation of refugee programmes (Indra, 2008). The latest major policy development relates to GAFM transforming into age, gender and diversity (AGD) mainstreaming, which also acknowledges and addresses men and boys' vulnerabilities (Edwards, 2010). The AGD approach accounts for and responds to vulnerabilities of forced migrants related to their age, gender and other diverse characteristics that in theory enables a more inclusive approach to forced migration policy and response.

Forced migration is gendered—women and men experience displacement in different ways (Freedman, 2007, 2010). Although displaced women often remain portrayed as a vulnerable and homogenised group of victims (Grabska, 2011), not only are there gender differences in forced migration but also differences within gender groups (Freedman, 2007; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). Different groups of women have different and specific experiences of conflict, flight and refuge, being subjected to identity-based systems of disadvantage and advantage. These systems relate to the intersections of gender, age, race, ethnicity, immigration status and religious background, among others, which in turn shape experiences of violence across forced migration pathways (ibid; Canning, 2017). Feminised patterns of migration evidence the diversity of migrant women's circumstances. Overall, women, who are often primary caregivers with restricted access to economic resources, may be restrained from fleeing or be highly dependent on smugglers and traffickers (ibid). Women travelling alone may be subjected to violence based on their gender, which as a category has not yet been marked as a legitimate ground for seeking asylum. International organisations highlight the intersectional aspect of asylum claims, whereby gender is recognised as being linked to other forms of discrimination (Canning, 2017).[8] The 1951 Refugee Convention defines 'refugee' in general terms, overlooking the gender-based dimension of persecution, as:

> '*Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.*' (UNHCR, 1951:3)

In 2002, UNHCR issued Guidelines on Gender-Related Persecution under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, formally recognising gender as a legitimate ground for persecution (UNHCR, 2002) and prompting

[8] For instance, CEDAW's General Recommendation 32 states: 'Gender-related claims to asylum may intersect with other proscribed grounds of discrimination, including age, race, ethnicity/nationality, religion, health, class, caste, being lesbian, bisexual or transgender and other status' (CEDAW, 2014, Point 16).

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several States to adopt similar national guidelines (e.g. Canada and Australia in the 1990s, see Akram, 1995: 17).

Various terms are commonly used to describe individuals forced to flee their homes. *Asylum seekers* are those in a transitory status who have applied for refugee recognition (UNHCR, 2017). *Forced migrant* is not an internationally recognised legal category but refers to persons engaged in migratory movements driven by force, compulsion or coercion (IOM, 2019). These labels often carry pejorative connotations, reinforcing processes of 'othering'. When combined—such as being identified as a refugee woman from a marginalised racial or religious background—these labels can compound vulnerability to VAW. By acknowledging these connotations, this work moves beyond them by adopting a more inclusive terminology. It opts for *displaced women* as an overarching term, encompassing refugees and internally displaced women who have left their homes due to war, persecution, climate emergencies or extreme poverty in search of protection.

Defining violence against women

There are different ways in which gendered violence is commonly conceptualised within the academic and policy discourse. This section discusses the limitations of key concepts. While there is no one universal definition of gendered violence, definitions have evolved to articulate women's exposure to violence in patriarchal structures and so to underscore gender as a relational construct which accommodates violence against men, too. Therefore, the international community widely uses the term 'gender-based violence' (GBV), while some agencies prioritise the term 'sexual and gender-based violence' (SGBV) to account for the criminal nature of rape and severe consequences inflicted upon survivors of sexual violence. In reality, however, the terms SGBV and GBV are often used interchangeably, especially in the humanitarian sector (IASC, 2015). Overall GBV describes:

> '*. . . 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.*' (IASC, 2015:5)

GBV can take different forms—from physical and sexual violence, including early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, to less visible emotional, psychological and economic violence, such as rape, sexual assault and harassment, domestic violence and the deprivation of resources and services. Recognising that violence is disproportionally perpetrated by men against women, the term violence against women (VAW) is commonly used to describe GBV against women.

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The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, was the first to[9] define VAW as:

> '*any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.*' (OHCHR, 1993:2)

While the international community commonly and neatly uses all of these terms—GBV, SGBV and VAW—interchangeably, the real-life boundaries between acts of violence are indefinite and messy (Gray, 2019). Different types of violence form a continuum and not a dichotomy, which this book will illustrate. Displaced women experience a spectrum of abuses across their migration experiences—from conflict settings and countries of transit to places of refuge—and this has been described by scholars as an intersectional continuum of violence with gendered harm (Krause, 2015; Canning, 2017). Yet, S/GBV and VAW do not reflect the complexity, multiplicity and intersectional and continued dimension of violence suffered as they mainly focus on gender dimensions of vulnerability and victimisation. Experiences of GBV and VAW interact with discrimination and other forms of violence on the grounds of intersecting identity markers (such as migration status) and continue along forced migration routes, as illustrated in Chapter 3. For example, refugee women are often abused not only because of their gender but also because of their race and religion. Gray warns of the dangers of classifying violence into rigid categories given the relatedness of violent acts:

> '*The multiple and interlinked harmful acts which come under the label of 'violence' do not fall unproblematically into neat, clearly delineated categories; rather, they coexist, they (re)produce one another, and the boundaries between them are shifting, blurred, and overlapping. Given this blurriness, how violences come to be divided into distinct typologies is not straightforward or inevitable…it entails potentially violent processes of silencing and homogenising.*' (2019:3)

Likewise, categorising VAW risks overlooking the cultural differences in understanding intersectional violence. The established definitions of violence, introduced above, fail to recognise culture-specific definitions. Many cultures define VAW differently based on subjective perspectives shaped by sociocultural factors (Yoshihama, 1999). Survivors themselves classify different actions and incidents as harmful. For example, refugee women from the Balkans described violence as cases of violence not necessarily directed against them but against the whole

[9] https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women (accessed 17 May 2026).

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nation, their family and children during war (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000). Many accounts of women recalled no worse experience of violence than losing someone dear to them, separating from family, fearing death, being forced to leave ('packing lives in a bag') and rebuilding their lives in unknown environments (ibid). Different meanings of violence point to the limitations of GBV and VAW as definitions, and the significance of recognising other intersecting forms of violence that forced migration entails over time and space. In addition, other forms of violence continue to emerge in migration, for example spiritual violence, which uses religious beliefs to recruit migrants to enter into trafficking arrangements (Kubai, 2025). In understanding VAW, two popular frameworks stand out in analysing the drivers of, and developing responses to, VAW: intersectional and ecological, which are explored next.

Approaching violence against women

The first approach to VAW is intersectional. Rooted in earlier Black feminist thought (Sojourner Truth in 1851; Anna Julia Cooper in 1892 and Combahee River Collective in 1977), intersectionality is today widely credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), who theorised discrimination as intersectional and multi-layered. Crenshaw demonstrates women's experiences of violence are the product of intersecting racism and sexism, and points to the interlocking asymmetries of power which privilege some and marginalise others. The process of categorisation exercises power, which is gathered around some identity categories and excludes others, leading to social outcomes such as the distribution of resources. An intersectional approach seeks to illuminate the interplay between gender and interconnected types of discrimination and unveils pre-existing factors that 'pre-determine' VAW. In doing so, it identifies survivors' vulnerabilities to discrimination, often related to their intersecting identities and power. It thus helps to explain the 'harm' of VAW and promises a more profound understanding of its root causes, manifestations and consequences.

Intersectionality emanated from feminist studies and feminist movements which conceptualised the causes of VAW in varying ways. Radical feminists argue that VAW is caused by gender inequality, male dominance and abuse of power (Damant et al., 2008). Postmodern feminists attend to abused women's own understandings of their identity, experiences, meanings and accounts of violence (Davies and Krane, 2003). Intersectional feminists construct VAW based on the intersecting relations of identity markers and expand the definition of women's abuse to culturally specific forms of violence. Intersectional studies show that gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class and immigration

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status-based oppressions are simultaneous, multiple and interlocking (Sokoloff, 2008). In forced displacement, the multiple systems of inequality and their intersections collectively produce VAW (Logie et al., 2017; Swart, 2013; James, 2010). One experience of violence compounds the next, producing complex lived experiences. In forced migration studies, immigration and citizenship status have been widely considered as additional layers of oppression (Erez et al., 2009).

There are very few studies on religion and intersectionality despite the wide recognition of discrimination based on religion. This may be due to prejudice against religions or patriarchal religious constructs and beliefs. For example, studies on Muslim minorities demonstrate that women experience a triple penalty due to their gender, race and religion (Casey, 2016). Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler (2020) suggest that religion appears as an afterthought in intersectional theory and international development. Investigating how religious inequalities intersect with gender inequalities in the context of religious minorities, freedom of religion and belief and religious '*otherisation*', they argue that religion has been rarely accounted for in international reports and conclude that religious inequalities have been widely overlooked among other inequalities.

The second popular analytical framework of VAW is an ecological framework by Heise (1998) who adapts ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which explores micro, meso and macro systems to seek better understanding of VAW. In terms of VAW, the ecological approach enables the unpacking of wider contexts in which violence manifests, and the root causes and risk factors across different levels. Bronfenbrenner defines the ecological environment as '*a set of nested structures, each inside the next . . . referred to as the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems . . .*' (1979:3), shaping individual development. The innermost part of this is defined by Heise (1998) as the microsystem, which includes the immediate setting where violence occurs: an individual's closest contacts, such as family, peers, social supports and other factors linked to a person's personal history. The exosystem includes social structures and institutions embedding the microsystem (e.g. family, neighbourhood). The next level, the mesosystem, is constituted by the wider social environment and connections and the interplay and linkages between different elements of environmental influences (e.g. extended family, community, school, workplace) and the general attitudes permeating culture and wider societal and policy influences on VAW. The outer-most level—the macrosystem—involves even wider social environments and structures, e.g. socio-economic and religious institutions and cultural practices. Heise, by collecting evidence across disciplines and countries, proposes a provisional ecological model to accommodate the complexity of real-life violence. Crucially, Heise's conceptualisation of causes of violence challenges feminist thought and goes beyond patriarchy, gender inequalities and power imbalances to show a myriad of factors contributing to

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such violence.[10] In this book, I also use the term 'socioecological' (and 'socioecology') interchangeably with 'ecological' to emphasise social aspects of interactions among people, and between them and with their environment.

Religion and forced migration

Most migrants affiliate with a religion (PEW, 2012) and their faith moves with them across borders (Knott, 2016). A comparison between refugee countries of origin (UNHCR, 2021:7) and their reports of religiosity (PEW, 2018) shows that many forced migrants come from countries with high levels of religiosity, which indicates the relevance of accounting for religion in forced migration and studying the relationship between gender and forced migration from a faith-sensitive perspective, examining how religious beliefs, practices and identities mediate gendered experiences of displacement and influence humanitarian responses.

The word 'religion' carries different meanings across societies and cultures (Ter Haar, 2011). It changes with everyday lived experience and influences other aspects of life (Dinham et al., 2018). There are substantive and functional definitions of religion—adapted accordingly by positivist and interpretivist methodological approaches (Berger, 1974; Rakodi, 2007). Substantive definitions seek to understand what religion is, focusing on the beliefs and the sacred in relation to religious affiliation and overlooking the functions of religion. Functional definitions, in turn, focus on what religion does and how it affects people, and these are critiqued for neglecting religious beliefs and reducing the transcendent aspects of religion (Zock, 1999). This book adapts Schilbrack's (2013) proposition that both substance and function constitute religion, arguing for the middle ground in defining religion, i.e. that the belief in a spiritual world, and its functions and practices constitute religion. In other words, connecting the beliefs with the actions of believers.

Studying religion in social science means understanding the processes and interactions that produce expressions of religion. Therefore, this book explores religious expressions in relation to social contexts and factors associated with their occurrence, and draws upon the respondents' meanings of religion, patterns of conduct and emotions (Beckford, 2003). It also draws on Talal Asad's critical work on religion, particularly in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) which challenges the notion of religion as a universal, static category and a system of symbols. He argues that religion is a historically located and discursively constructed concept, shaped by colonialism, modernity and secularism. Asad critiques the secular liberal tendency to define religion narrowly—as a private belief system—while

[10] The feminist community initially reluctantly received Heises' approach as they fought hard over decades for the international community to accept violence's roots in male power privilege.

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ignoring its embeddedness in law, politics and social life, because power enables the development of religious dispositions.

Beyond religion, this book also involves faith and spirituality as closely related concepts. *Faith* includes various forms of belief or trust in some form of transcendent, divine reality (Lunn, 2009), which may or may not be linked with a formal religion. Faith is described as existential and relational extending to a sense of commitment beyond empirical evidence, a personal orientation towards the divine (Schneiders, 1986). *Faith community* refers to a singular group of congregational members affiliated with a certain religion. *Religion,* in brief, refers to an institutionalised and structured system of belief, rituals, practices and moral codes regarding a supernatural power shaping religious values and worldviews (ibid), codified through scriptures, doctrines and institutions (Cook, 2015). Religion operates as the basis for shared identity, affiliation and cosmology and is a focal concept for analysis. In operationalising religion, it is useful to consider what religious resources constitute religion. Here I rely on Ter Haar's (2011) conceptualisation of religious resources, namely religious ideas, practices, experience and organisation. *Religious ideas* refer to beliefs, including thinking related to VAW and migration. *Religious practices* refer to rituals and behaviours which may be gendered. *Religious experience* refers to metaphysical experiences specific to gendered forced migration experience. *Religious organisation* refers to a place, a collective of people sharing religious beliefs and official institutions of religious denominations, such as a church or a mosque (Bartelink et al., 2017). *Spirituality* describes a broad quality and a personal lived experience of connection with greater divine/cosmic power that can also exist within and without religion (Solomon, 2002:24; Schneiders, 1986). It can involve meditation, reflection, prayer and ethical living, all often linked to meaning-making and inner transformation.

Religions with a mixed transcendent and socially constructed character also constitute, shape and affect women. Mohanty (1991:74) underscores '[w]*omen are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks*'. Religion is embedded in the lives of women of faith from their early socialisation and accompanies them across the processes of forced migration. Thus, for many, religion is an integral part of forced migrant experiences (Wilson and Mavelli, 2016). On the one hand, in humanitarian crises, people turn to religion for meaning and relief from anxiety (Walker et al., 2012). On the other hand, religion can be a source of discrimination and violence. Fear of persecution on various grounds, including religion and being part of a religious and/or ethnic minority, for many people, triggers forced displacement (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001; Canning, 2017). There is also an intersection between the definition of religion and asylum/migration outcomes. Certain approaches to religion—such as those shaped by an orientalist lens—can render some populations more vulnerable during asylum processes, as their religion-based claims are often misunderstood (see Akram, 2000).

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The relationship between religion and forced migration is reciprocal and dynamic. The world's major religions' normative values promote refugee protection (Hollenbach, 2014). A wealth of research suggests the diverse ways in which religion and migration intertwine and influence forced migrants across their journeys (e.g. Eppsteiner and Hagan, 2016; Wilson and Mavelli, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2020). Studies indicate religion cuts across forced migration experiences, by providing comfort and hope during perilous and unpredictable refugee journeys (e.g. Goździak, 2002). As Knott points out '[r]*eligion travels through migrants, but also with them*' (2016:76), taking on a transnational character across borders. Religious beliefs, practices and traditions, with scriptural metaphors of refuge and survival as resources, remain part of survivors' identity, shaping the meanings of their experiences and providing psychological, spiritual and material support (Parsitau, 2011). People in displacement also use religious rituals and practices, such as prayers, fasting and narrative traditions, as means to ease and facilitate their journeys and settlement experience, supporting their active coping strategies (Knott, 2016). Leaving their lives behind, they pray for safe arrival from perilous journeys with the help of the divine. Upon arrival, many praise God for helping them to arrive to their destinations. Yet, religious practices are also influenced by displacement and the social disruption this brings (Knott, 2016); religious connections and resources may be lost and altered.

Religion may also incite the metaphysical experiences during the processes of migration. As a catalyst, it can help marginalised social groups assert and resist power and find transformation (Winter, 2006). Likewise, migration can be a spiritual experience in itself and be interpreted as undertaken by the scriptural characters searching for peace upon divine instructions or making promises to God in exchange for a safe arrival (Eppsteiner and Hagan, 2016). Thus, the meaning of migration is profound, theological and spiritual:

> '. . . *migration can be a source of theology. This means firstly to respect migration as a space of faith and believing, particularly for women. Secondly, migration is a kind of test of theology; the meaning and claim of lived religion can be questioned.*' (Winkler, 2017:94)

Exploring religious and spiritual resources of displaced people in the context of resilience emphasises their agency involved in religious processes of migration (Eppsteiner and Hagan, 2016) and helps to deconstruct their journeys—the preparation, transit, arrival and settlement in destination countries. It also helps to understand forced migrant vulnerability to gendered violence, i.e. how religious beliefs can hinder help-seeking (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003) and be used to justify abuse (Douki et al., 2003) and how religious identity may be used to fuel anti-migrant sentiments. Extensive research tackles the issues of policy prejudice against Muslim migrants and obsession with women embodying religious

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symbols, such as the hijab, invoking the vulnerability of oppressed '*muslimwomen*' (Cooke et al., 2008)—grouping Muslim women together into a singular identity. Further, studies highlight that the consequences of the 'War on Terror' targeting certain religious groups, especially Muslims, fuelled stigmatisation of Muslim refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016; Wilson and Mavelli, 2016).

Religion remains especially contentious in refugee immigration contexts where debates are fuelled by media and public policy discourses (Wilson and Mavelli, 2016). For example, lines blur between the terminologies of 'refugee', 'terrorist' and 'Muslim' in Western countries of immigration (ibid). Religion has often been essentialised as inciting abuse and even used as an argument to justify armed occupation in countries with a 'violent religion' (Abu-Lughod, 2002). The idiom of 'good and bad religion' translates into exclusionary discourses and hostile immigration policies with discriminatory resettlement criteria filtering refugee eligibility by religion (Wilson and Mavelli, 2016). For example, studies on Muslim minorities demonstrate women experience a triple penalty due to their gender, race and religion (Casey, 2016). Presupposing religious identities with violence and conflict, results in escalating 'securitisation' of migration and refugee movement, rather than humanitarianism (Wilson and Mavelli, 2016).

Religion, gender and forced migration

Gender and forced migration studies have engaged to some extent with the influences of religion on migrant identity, survival and responses to forced displacement (e.g. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014, 2016). However, the level of complexity of intersection between religious diversity, the continuum of VAW and the increasing scale of displacement, means that their interconnectedness has been under-researched. While religion and migration studies rarely focus on the gender differentiation and contextualisation of experiences of gendered violence among displaced survivors, gender and forced migration studies tend to overlook the religious dimension of gendered displacement. This book aims to overcome this, because gender is a relational concept which intersects with religion, faith, spirituality and other non-religious beliefs, which are integral to people's social identity. Research illustrates that religion remains an important concern for displaced women shaping their daily experiences of fortitude and resilience (Pertek et al., 2023). Yet, feminist and gender studies of forced migration have rendered the experiences of some women's groups invisible, such as women of diverse intersecting identities for whom religion matters. Their voices underpin this book. Therefore, further integration of religion, gender and forced migration matters for better understanding of the intersecting gendered and religious experiences of displaced populations affiliated with and influenced by religion.

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Efforts to integrate gender, religion and forced migration help us to better understand gendered vulnerability to religious discrimination, and vice versa, religious vulnerability to gendered violence and the expressions of resilience and transformation. While secular humanitarian frameworks tend to avoid religion in gender equality and violence against women and girls (VAWG) programming, religion matters for many survivors. Humanitarian stakeholders work with religion with caution[11] for the fear that 'touching religion' could breach their humanitarian standards. In practice, such attitudes can pose additional barriers to VAWG prevention and weaken humanitarian commitments to neutrality and religious freedoms. While many international organisations work with faith-based organisations (FBOs) and have developed frameworks for religious engagement (e.g. UNFPA[12] in 2009 and UNDP[13] in 2014), such initiatives rarely account for VAW, which is often perceived as too risky and taboo to address with religious actors.

Why this book?

This book focuses on religion as an intersecting social category in research and humanitarian practice and policy, and an integral part of displaced women's lives. By bringing women's stories to light, it critically examines and expands intersectional and socioecological theory and challenges existing humanitarian norms. It argues that non-institutionalised religion (beyond religious institutions, as individual experience) is part of VAW and displacement experience which should be reflected in policy and practice in order to develop integrated and more effective responses to VAW. By sharing survivors' stories and humanitarian practitioners' accounts, the book expands the understanding of religious influences on women's experiences of violence across conflict, migratory routes and refuge, and informs VAW prevention and response.

Although religion is widely acknowledged as part of migration, it remains the less visible category permeating the experiences of VAW. In particular, religious beliefs, practices and experiences, as non-institutionalised, remain within a personal sphere, and rather invisible to outsiders. The book, in turn, uses an integrated intersectional and socioecological approach to account for religious dimensions of VAW in displacement. Drawing upon women's worldviews, it explores complex interactions between religion, VAW and forced migration and

[11] https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2023/03/gender-and-forced-displacement-time-to-integrate-religion-into-humanitarian-responses-to-violence-against-women/" (accessed 24 May 2026).

[12] https://unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/fbo_engagement.pdf

[13] https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP-CSO-Engaging-FBOs-RLs-October-2014.pdf (accessed 24 May 2026).

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articulates the opportunities and challenges associated with religion. The book has three objectives:

1. To examine how religion shapes displaced women's intersectional vulnerability to VAW.
2. To explore how religion shapes women's resilience and coping with VAW and displacement.
3. To critically investigate how humanitarian service providers account for the role of religion in displaced women's experiences of VAW.

An integrated approach to religion guides this book. It integrates the two paradigms introduced above—intersectional and ecological—to identify the multiple layers of risk factors, while situating religion within these. In doing so, it develops a heuristic conceptual framework (see Chapter 2) to explore religious influences on the context in which VAW occurs, at different levels of social systems in evolving stages of displacement. In doing so, it rethinks concepts of intersectionality, resilience, humanitarianism and religious engagement.

While diverse identity markers shape VAW experience (Freedman, 2007), this book argues for the recognition of religion as being strongly influential across all levels of socioecology. As a transmitter of power (Knott, 2016), religion intersects with other power transmitters in nested structures, for instance, patriarchy, gender inequality, classism, ageism and racism (Chavis and Hill, 2008). Thus, an integrated approach moves beyond what is visible and uncovers the religious and spiritual dimensions of women's realities in connection with other intersecting factors.

Context

To offer diverse insights on displacement, gender and religion, this study draws on data from two sites—Türkiye and Tunisia—each with distinct migration governance and humanitarian systems (see Table 1.1). Focusing on transit and settlement countries along different migratory routes offers a nuanced view of global migration dynamics and VAW in displacement. Women's narratives present transnational experiences spanning countries of origin, conflict, transit and refuge.

Türkiye is considered a developed country with a national infrastructure to manage international migration and is a recipient of extensive funding from the European Union to prevent onward migration. The Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) manages migration-related matters ranging from issuing residence permits, to co-ordinating voluntary returns of forced migrants to countries of origin. It is one of the Muslim-majority countries which has signed

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Table 1.1 Migration-related risks of VAW in research sites

Country	
Türkiye	– Migration administered by the Presidency of Migration Management. – Only European people are eligible for refugee status. – 'Syrians under Temporary Protection' (SuTP) entitled to temporary protection, work and education. – Syrians who acquire Turkish citizenship, as well as Syrians arriving from a third country under a residence permit, are not eligible for temporary protection under Türkiye's Temporary Protection Regulation. – Nearly all temporary protection centres for SuTPs closed down. – Shelter or housing not provided. – Registered Syrian VAW survivors can access shelters for protection for six months, afterwards facing homelessness. – Limited financial support for victims under international protection (non-Syrians). – Irregular migrants not entitled to social assistance.
Tunisia	– No legal pathways exist to regularise residence for irregular migrants. – No spousal visas are available; family reunion is only possible for migrants who already hold legal status. – Humanitarian protection is administered by UNHCR, mainly through humanitarian assistance, as all registrations of asylum seekers have been suspended since 2024. – Irregular migrants apprehended by police or national guards may be detained; some are returned to shelters, while others are expelled to other countries by road or air, abandoned and/or deported to desert areas. – Refugee procedures are lengthy, with significant waiting times for resettlement. – Assisted voluntary returns take place on a large scale. – Lack of social assistance: the most vulnerable migrants stay in overcrowded shelters and are required to secure their own accommodation; some face collective expulsions and deportations. – Voucher assistance for the most vulnerable exists but is insufficient to cover basic needs.

the 1951 Refugee Convention enshrining refugee protection into law. At the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Türkiye remains one of the countries hosting the largest refugee populations globally, with over 2.9 million Syrians under temporary protection and 193,340 refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries in 2024, including significant numbers from Iraq and Afghanistan.[14] Following the 1951 Convention, only people from Europe are eligible for refugee status and 'Syrians under Temporary Protection' (SuTP) are entitled to temporary protection, work and education. Registered Syrian survivors of VAW can access shelters for

[14] https://globalcompactrefugees.org/gcr-action/countries/republic-turkiye (accessed 24 May 2026).

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protection for six months but survivors of other nationalities, for example those under international protection and those considered as irregular migrants, are not eligible for public support. I concentrated on Ankara, the capital city, as one of the most important and most overcrowded forced migrant destinations. In Türkiye, Syrian and Iraqi women had been settled for a longer time on average than those in Tunisia, a frequent diversion route, transit point and a refugee hotspot for displaced populations seeking to reach Europe.

According to UNHCR (2024), the country hosted a small displaced population (16,638) of registered refugees and asylum seekers from multiple countries from the Middle East and Africa. Migration flows to this North African state are mixed, including refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants with many fleeing exploitation from neighbouring Libya and staying in Tunisia temporarily. Lacking national infrastructure to manage international migration, the Tunisian government has established a memorandum of understanding with the UNHCR responsible for managing humanitarian protection in Tunisia. The procedures involved in this memorandum include processing asylum claims and regulating the legal status of refugees—both considered as lengthy processes with long waiting times, especially for refugee resettlement, due to high demand and limited places of asylum in countries of refuge. Mobility of irregular migrants is policed and restricted, and the lack of spousal visas means family reunion is only possible for migrants with legal status. However, there are no legal pathways for irregular migrants to gain residence. Forced migrants lack social assistance and adequate living conditions, often living in temporary and overcrowded shelters. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable displaced individuals receive modest and insufficient food vouchers (around £1.50 a day). Seeking to document the untold migrant crisis, I worked in southern urban settings in Medenine and Zarzis, which are among the closest cities to the Libyan border, and receive new migrants daily.

Research methods

In this section, I present an overview of the overall research design, including its rationale and methodological and analytical procedures. A mixed methods research approach was used to capture a multidimensional view of religion in gender and forced migration from women's perspective. I sought to account for diversity of women's accounts through an intersectional feminist epistemology which prioritises women's experiences as the basis of knowledge. According to feminist social constructionists '*giving voice to women's perspectives means identifying ways women create meaning and experience life from their particular position in the social hierarchy*' (Riger, 1992:734). Therefore, this book amplifies women's voices, their stories and needs, using a social constructivist paradigm which guided the research process. Social constructionism establishes that what is real is a

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construction in the mind of individuals and recognises that there are multiple and sometimes conflicting constructions (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). I therefore referred to the way that the social world was seen by women and how they understand their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

The research aimed to better understand the influences of religion on displaced women's experiences of violence by examining how religion shapes their vulnerability and resilience. It prioritised displaced survivors' narratives and meanings that they constructed about the place of religion in their lived experiences. The study also explored how humanitarian practitioners account for women's experiences of religion in their protection interventions. Inclining towards a pragmatic understanding of religion, that is understanding it from respondents' perspectives (Waardenburg cited in Schliesser et al., 2020), I paid attention to women's subjective expressions of religious ideas in social and cultural contexts to understand their own differentiation of religious and cultural realms, including their religious interpretations and how they believed religion shaped their lives. However, I did not discuss truth claims of religion but instead looked at the meanings attached to religious beliefs, practices and experiences. The individual variations within Levantine and African respondent groups, the evolving nature of religion in migration processes and diverse interpretations of religious texts, made the research process complex.

Each researcher is biographically situated. My research commitment is grounded in the quest for social justice, embedded within my own cosmological reflections on egalitarianism. A combination of my intersecting identities—being a migrant woman and humanitarian with a mixed Muslim and Christian religious background, and a mother of a mixed-heritage child—shaped both my research interests and process. Depending on time, place and interactions with participants, different aspects of my intersecting identity became more silent, influencing my positionality and the data produced (Manohar et al., 2017). For example, sharing the same gender with respondents facilitated communication, my age reduced social distance and being a mother attracted women with children, half of whom are a similar age. I built rapport with both Muslim and Christian women because I empathised with, and shared, the universal metaphysical dimensions of faith.

My understanding of gender constructions within some of these faith dynamics allowed me to recognise important nuances and sensitivities. I also aimed to alter the hierarchical relations between the researcher and respondents by levelling the ground between us (Fonow and Cook, 2005). Striving for non-exploitative research relationships, at times it was natural to develop sisterly bonds, typical to feminist research (Reinharz and Chase, 2002). To manage my objectivity and prioritise women's voices, diligent reflexivity, continued internal dialogue, reflection and critical self-examination aided the process. My own experience of migration enabled me to appreciate the varied aspects of coping, which others might dismiss as passive or problematic. In doing so, I sought to foreground women's agency and strengths.

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The study drew on an interdisciplinary semi-systematic literature review and in-depth semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with thirty-eight displaced women and thirty-six humanitarian practitioners (for demographic profile see Appendix 2). Semi-structured interviews allowed for unexpected but productive turns and digressions (Gubrium et al., 2012) and were particularly suitable in researching sensitive topics, such as VAW, where it is important to enable respondents to tell their story in their own way and at their own pace. Women participants were asked about: experience of abuse and discrimination, vulnerability, resilience, religious resources and coping, wellbeing and support received. All research instruments were translated to Arabic and French and piloted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these tools to make adequate adjustments. Some interviews were conducted in English without interpreters. A customised questionnaire instrument consisted of six sections on socio-demographic data, religious background, religious coping, religious resources and wellbeing constructs, combining a scale of brief religious coping (Pargament et al., 2011), psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002) and post-traumatic growth inventory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996).

Some women respondents played an active role in the research, either by inviting other participants or, as in the case of two English speaking women, by becoming focal points introducing me to their local communities and potential respondents. Given their linguistic competency and interest, these two women, after discussing ethical considerations and preparation, also collaborated as interpreters in several interviews in Türkiye and one in Tunisia. Throughout this research, interpreters played an essential role in the production of knowledge. I engaged female local interpreters from host and migrant communities who fitted the social position of participants to varying degrees. Besides live interpretations, interviews were transcribed verbatim by four bilingual transcribers, who translated recorded interviews from Arabic and French to English, in order to thoroughly examine women's responses. Interpretation processes involved diverse epistemological positions—of the interpreters, transcribers and mine. Interpreters, some from refugee communities, played an important role in producing the data. Upon critical reflection, it is fair to say such diversification strengthened the research process because it allowed different voices and epistemologies to come forward. The study was therefore grounded in multiple experiences of oppression with 'triple subjectivity'—the interrelations between researcher, respondents and interpreter—shaping the research outcomes (Temple and Edwards, 2002:6).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Birmingham. All research procedures were guided by the ethical guidelines of the University and international standards for researching GBV (WHO, 2007). During interviews, the survivor-centred approach (IASC, 2015) was adopted to prioritise respondents' needs and wellbeing and not expose them to further vulnerability or harm. Regular breaks and refreshments during the interviews were offered to ensure physical

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comfort and emotional safety. In addition, if needed, survivors were provided support with access to information and services, whilst ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

Throughout the research process, as an author, I also prioritised trauma-informed strategies to safeguard my own wellbeing, including spacing interviews over time and engaging in regular supervision and reflective support. Similarly, in writing this book, some material may be distressing for readers, who are invited to approach sensitive content with self-care. Including such material is unavoidable, as 'remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims' (Herman, 1992: 15).

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and treated as confidential. The safety of survivors and of the researcher and interpreters were a priority. Care was taken to ensure the interviews took place in a safe space. Information about the research was provided verbally and in writing, while inclusion provisions were made for illiterate participants. The consent for interviews with women and institutional stakeholders was in written form, with participants' signatures obtained before the interview. Verbal consent was also optional for survivors who were illiterate.

The study adopted systematic thematic analysis for its ability to provide a rich and detailed account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This flexible method aligns well with a social constructivist paradigm. I followed multiple steps for qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative analysis, as diagrammatised in Appendix 3. Using an inductive approach, I identified a new theory from primary data and key themes across two settings, reported in Chapters 3–6. Software, NVIVO 12, supported transcript analysis, with data-driven coding conducted separately for each country, adopting a similar framework. Coding inductively captured the contextual differences between two settings through an iterative process—refining and merging themes. I then identified joint and country-specific themes looking for relationships between and within codes, potential themes and subthemes. Thematic maps verified the adequacy of themes across the dataset. While some themes were consistent, subthemes varied between Muslim and Christian participants and between Levantine and Sub-Saharan contexts, between and within different locations. Thus, concept codes were compiled in joint themes across two contexts (Bazeley, 2013). I also examined contextual and individual factors behind these differences. Exploratory and time-ordered variations clarified features of women's experiences across places and journeys.

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For the quantitative data analysis informing Chapter 5, IBM SPSS 24 and Excel were used. First, data was cleaned, treating any omitted values by error with an imputation—i.e. replacement by the mean of the item in the scale across all survey participants.[15] I used tabulation to visualise results of women's religious coping practices, psychological distress and posttraumatic growth and cross-tabulation in order to manually analyse the relationship between different factors and variables, such as religiosity levels and demographic characteristics. This approach was a little productive due to the enormous quantity of data and multi-potential relationships. Also, cross-tabulations did not provide for statistical significance of relationships, hence I moved to utilise other statistical tools, such as Kendall's Tau correlation test (see more in Chapter 5). Qualitative and quantitative analysis were integrated in the presentation of findings at the final stage.

Outline of this book

The first part of the book invites readers to rethink violence, displacement and religion. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 'Integrated intersectional and socioecological framework' introduces the conceptual resources guiding this book. It is based on an interdisciplinary literature review, demonstrating research gaps and the potential for integrating intersectional and socioecological theories.

The second part of the book focuses on the intersectional and socioecological analysis of violence against women and religion by exploring their experiences across different stages of displacement.

The third part of this book sets out the way forward. Chapter 3 'Reframing violence against women: the spiral continuum' challenges the gender-based violence theory and illustrates the nature of violence against displaced women through their stories and proposes a new take on the violence continuum in displacement by presenting its spiral nature.

Chapter 4 'Sourcing vulnerability: Intersectional religious influences' provides an analysis of the causes of VAW. It contributes to the development of intersectional theory by identifying intersectional vulnerabilities, centring on religion as intersecting with different factors in shaping vulnerability to VAW.

Chapter 5 'Resourcing resilience: Adaptive religious coping' presents how religious resources support forced migrant women survivors and enable coping behaviours against violence. This chapter enriches resilience, religious coping and conservation of resources theory by illustrating how religious resources enable displaced women's coping with violence and displacement.

[15] Twelve individual item entries out of 4,066 potential entries (103 entries in each survey of thirty-eight participants).

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The third part of the book focuses on rethinking humanitarianism and religious engagement for women's protection by engaging with humanitarian responses to VAW.

Chapter 6 'Humanitarian default: in(ex)clusion of religion' presents humanitarian practitioners' attitudes to religion and VAW and highlights the diverse ways in which humanitarian practitioners account for and engage with women's experiences of religion in their protection work. It coins the term 'religious in(ex)clusion spectrum' to reveal the simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of religion in humanitarian response.

Chapter 7 is the final chapter where implications for humanitarian, migration and development sectors are articulated. 'Toward an intersectional socioecology of protection' presents reflections on the state of knowledge and this book's empirical and conceptual contributions. This chapter invites a rethinking of humanitarianism by engaging with religion in humanitarian and migration systems more effectively. It argues that protection interventions should not overlook the worldview of forced migrants, if they are to respond effectively.

This book matters because challenges related to global forced displacement require the international humanitarian and human rights community to mobilise innovative pathways to protection from VAW by reducing risks and strengthening resilience of displaced populations. Given the complex interactions between gender, religion and forced migration, it is vital to explore how the potentials and risks associated with religion in the context of VAW in displacement can be better understood and integrated into research, policy and practice. More concerted efforts are much needed to save lives. Engaging with religion as a protective and risk factor is an important way forward to mobilise adequate resources to make migration routes and places of refuge safer for displaced women. The next chapter develops a conceptual framework of this book which structures empirical chapters.

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2
Integrated intersectional and socioecological framework

'. . . The role of religion is so complicated . . . it has so many functions. . . it can be used to strengthen structures that oppress women and contribute to VAWG, but it can also be transformative and improve the situation of women and girls . . .' (Monica, GBV and MHPSS Advisor, International Organisation, Lebanon)

Introduction

This chapter develops a conceptual framework to guide this book. It helps to understand how religion influences displaced women's experiences of violence. It asks what religion *does* in the everyday lives of displaced women—how it informs meaning, identity, agency and constraint—and what humanitarianism, in turn, *does with religion*, whether by engaging it, sidelining it or reframing it to fit institutional agendas.

By locating religion within both intersectional and ecological orientations, this chapter maps the current state of knowledge on how religious identities, beliefs and practices shape vulnerability and resilience. It argues that religion simultaneously sources vulnerability and resources resilience, capturing its dual but non-binary role. Indeed, the blurred and context-specific distinctions between religion as a risk and a protective factor are rarely discussed. While religion is widely recognised for condoning and challenging violence against women (VAW) (James, 2011; Kalmanofsky, 2017; Nyangweso and Olupona, 2019; Johnson, 2015), its implications for violence against displaced women remain underexplored. An integrated conceptual lens invites innovative ways to engage with the complex and often overlooked role of religion in women's experiences.

I begin by extending the concept of VAW to a continuum of violence and then bring intersectional and ecological theories into dialogue to situate religion within both, as an understudied category. Building on this foundation, the chapter examines conceptually how religious identities, beliefs and norms intersect with patriarchy and displacement dynamics to shape risk. It then draws on resilience, ecological approaches, conservation of resources and religious coping theories to

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explore how it shapes protection. The chapter concludes with a state of policy and practice landscape for humanitarian engagement with religion, identifying gaps and implications for protection futures.

From VAW to a continuum of violence

At the outset, I argue to reframe violence against displaced women to the continuum of violence because different harms interconnect and are not confined to specific moments or locations. Instead of treating incidents as separate events, the continuum situates VAW within a broader spectrum of harm, reflecting the complex realities of displaced populations. While each woman's trajectory is unique, influenced by her identity and the context she navigates, scholars have theorised a continuum of violence with blurred spatial and temporal boundaries across time and space (Gray, 2019). In other words, the start and endpoint of violence are unclear. In forced migration, this continuum reflects how violence unfolds across different stages of conflict, flight, transit, refuge and resettlement with widening patterns (Krause, 2015; Canning, 2017; Phillimore and Pertek, 2022). Violence can occur at every stage of the refugee journey (Freedman, 2007), as a spiral of traumatic events—rape, torture and exile—that form a continuum with long-lasting consequences (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000).

Feminist literature widely recognises the interconnections between different types of violence at different levels in public (geopolitical) and private (intimate) spheres (Kelly, 1988), as 'intra-actively' related levels of experience that are brought into being 'with and through one another' (Basham, 2013: 11). The nature of violence is unfixed and dynamic, its meaning and effects develop across individual and community experiences (Kelly, 1988).

Distinct vulnerabilities among different social groups of migrant women shape the unique experiences of each woman (Canning, 2017: 27). The temporal intersections of inequalities and identities occur across women's lives forming multidimensional and complex lived experiences of violence, differently embedded in each individual's context and meaning, as inequalities intersect at fluid points of identity and social relations, rather than being fixed categories (Walby et al., 2012). For example, violence experienced in conflict zones may be compounded by abuse during transit and further exacerbated by social exclusion in host countries. Daily insecurities, such as housing inadequacies and deportation risks, compound previous trauma. The asylum process itself can be a source of harm (Pertek and Phillimore, 2022). An intersectional continuum of violence accounts for '*intersectional experiences within these continuums*' shaped by diverse identities and lived experiences of different but interdependent forms of violence, including direct, structural and cultural violence, conflict-related sexual violence, domestic abuse and trafficking, as discussed next.

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Direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990) are causally linked, interdependent and mutually reinforce one another. Direct violence refers to physical and physiological harm and can also manifest in depriving one of their socio-cultural identity through coercion and forcibly removing one from their home. Structural violence describes systemic inequalities embedded in institutions that deny access to resources and rights that impact beyond the bodily marks, affecting mind and spirit through 'segmentation', 'marginalization' and 'fragmentation' of the vulnerable groups with 'second class citizenship' (Galtung, 1990: 292–5). Cultural violence is defined as 'any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural form' (Galtung, 1990: 291). These are internalised norms and ideologies that can transform the moral character of harmful acts, making exploitation appear normal or justified and can evolve into direct violence. For example, ignoring basic human needs, such as nutrition and medical care, has the potential to cause death indirectly through extended causal chains, including starvation and illnesses (Galtung, 1990).

Religion is considered by Galtung (1990) as one of six cultural elements (alongside ideology, language, art and empirical and formal science) which can be used to justify entitlements and exclusions within broader systems of harm. Religious doctrines may reinforce a 'chosen vs. unchosen' dichotomy, which allegorically maps onto the 'Self–Other' divide, dehumanising the 'Other'. Also, he considers male dominance as a form of cultural violence, stressing the systemic suffering and marginalisation disproportionately affecting women. But many feminist scholars argue that violence is not biologically predetermined but shaped by cultural expectations (Hooks, 2004).

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is widely recognised as a weapon of war (Ferris, 2007; Skjelsbaek, 2001) and encompasses rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse perpetrated by state and non-state armed actors or opportunists. Rape in war has been internationally recognised as a form of genocide and persecution (Ankenbrand, 2002). Minority groups are particularly vulnerable when their gender intersects with ethnic, religious or political marginalisation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, mass rape was used as a strategic tool to undermine Muslim fighters and ethnically cleanse communities (Salzman, 1998; Skjelsbaek, 2001). Women with specific ethnoreligious identities were targeted because they symbolised national culture.

CRSV does not occur in isolation. Research shows that gender-based violence (GBV) before, during and after conflict is interconnected. Intimate partner violence (IPV) and family violence are prevalent in conflict settings and across the life course (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2021). IPV often intensifies during conflict due to stress, displacement and breakdown of social structures. However, Gray (2019), challenging the 'war/not-war divide', argues that domestic violence is part of wartime social relations and should be understood within the broader context of conflict violence. It is not confined to the battlefield but extends into

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homes, communities and institutions. CRSV and IPV form a continuum that spans pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict periods.

Studies on domestic abuse among refugees reduce it to culture, disregarding structural violence and the impact of silent migration-related risks that drive VAW (Sahraoui, n.d.; Stoyanova, 2018; Pertek and Phillimore, 2022). Everyday experiences of racism, sexism, hate-crime and anti-migrant sentiment (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001) compound the effects of displacement. Evidence shows that overlapping systems of inequality produce distinct vulnerabilities for migrant women, both within their communities and in broader society (Sokoloff, 2008). Only a few studies have specifically examined how religion shapes these experiences in migration contexts (e.g. Ghafournia, 2017; Crisp et al., 2018, Pertek et al., 2023). Harmful community norms—such as shaming survivors—further stigmatise displaced women and silence disclosure.

Human trafficking is another prevalent form of exploitation, intersecting with gender-based violence, within a violence continuum in forced migration (Pertek, 2022). Migration increases the risk of trafficking, particularly when protective systems break down. While trafficking involves coercion, deception and abuse of power for sexual or labour exploitation (OHCHR, 2000), smuggling typically involves consent and border crossing. However, the line between the two is often blurred. Initial agreements to be smuggled can evolve into trafficking when exploitative dynamics emerge over time (Kelly, 2005). Young women and those with disabilities are disproportionately targeted due to perceived helplessness and lack of support. Emerging evidence demonstrates religious and spiritual beliefs can shape experiences of trafficking and exploitation, such as forced ritual servitude, sexual abuse and coerced labour within a religiously sanctioned framework (Kubai, 2025). These and other forms of violence have severe consequences in compounding the continuum of violence.

Impacts of a violence continuum

Evidence consistently shows that violence has short-term and long-term consequences for survivors' physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being. Understanding the continuum of violence requires acknowledging these extensive harms. Displacement is widely recognised as a traumatic and gendered experience, with sequential phases—persecution, flight, transit, temporary residence and return—compounding distress over time (Keilson, 1992). Chronic uncertainty and temporariness further intensify trauma (Phillimore and Cheung, 2021). While not all migrants develop trauma, approximately half may experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the prevalence of which, however, is debated.

The immediate and long-term impacts of VAW are multiple and undermine material, biological, mental, cultural, social, spiritual and emotional wellbeing

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(Williamson and Robinson, 2006). Abuse often leads to serious immediate and long-term effects, including physical (e.g. injuries, impairment), social (e.g. stigmatisation, shame), reproductive (e.g. pregnancy from rape, sexually transmitted diseases), mental (e.g. anxiety, depression, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)), spiritual health (e.g. spiritual tensions, existential crisis) (e.g. Mahoney et al., 2015) and death (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2021). The mental health, reproductive health and material needs of forced migrant survivors of VAW require immediate support, including expert medical and psychiatric help, legal support and housing support. Less visible post-VAW mental health effects are widely under-reported even though sexually assaulted women (in general population) are among the most affected by the burden of PTSD and other psychological and emotional reactions (Mason and Lodrick, 2013).

Survivors, exposed to high prevalence of risks during their journeys, often suffer from a multi-layered trauma or ongoing trauma as a result of structural inequalities, structural violence and multiple exposure to VAW. High severity of mental health disorders among forced migrant women can be indicative of VAW experience (Krause, 2015). In addition to distal (remote) stressors, such as conflict-related trauma due to war, rape and torture, survivors face proximal (daily) stressors such as housing inadequacies, safety risks and discrimination that may have greater psychological impact than past traumas (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010). I draw on an intersectional and ecological lens to analyse the determinants of vulnerability and resilience shaping impacts of violence, while connecting VAW to multiple identity-based oppressions across the social system to locate religious influences.

Integrating intersectional and socioecological lens

Intersectional and ecological approaches are often used in isolation. I integrate them to locate the place of religion in violence against displaced women. From an ecological lens, religion operates across multiple levels—individual, relational, community, institutional and societal. From an intersectional lens, religion intersects with other social identities, such as gender, race and age. Together, an integrated intersectional and socioecological lens provides a more inclusive analytical foundation for engaging with the diverse and context specific ways religion shapes VAW in displacement. It enables researchers and practitioners to deconstruct multiple micro, meso and macro-level factors and the role of intersecting identities in VAW experience.

VAW is recognised as inextricably linked to other forms of discrimination and oppression, and intersectionality has been applied to analyse multiple factors shaping women's experiences (Damant et al., 2008). Women's experiences of violence in displacement are framed by multiple, intersecting identity markers,

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including gender, age, race and religion (Freedman, 2007; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). While intersectional theory identifies how overlapping identities shape experiences of oppression, it has under-engaged with religion, reflecting an embedded feminist bias against religion. In contrast, ecological theory, rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems model, has long recognised religion as a component of broader social environments influencing individual wellbeing. The proposed framework builds on the model by Logie et al. (2017) through their research with displaced women and girls in post-earthquake Haiti, which was among the first studies to situate intersectional violence and coping within an ecological model.

The integration of intersectional and ecological approaches seeks to deconstruct the interplay between gender and interconnected forms of discrimination, revealing factors that *pre-determine* VAW—that is, pre-existing conditions that drive incidents of violence at different levels. It identifies survivors' vulnerabilities, often shaped by their intersecting identities and positions within power structures, helping to critically explain the root causes and the impact of harm. An integrated approach also identifies the multidetermined resilience of women in shaping their wellbeing outcomes. Within this approach, religious experience is neither romanticised nor vilified but instead engaged with in all its complexity, acknowledging the spiritual, communal and symbolic dimensions that shape displaced women's lived realities.

While intersectionality has expanded from a focus on gender, race and class (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991), religion remains notably absent from much of the scholarly and practical discourse. Religion is often treated as either irrelevant or inherently oppressive within feminist theory, overlooking the contributions of feminist theologians and liberation thinkers from the Global South (Singh, 2015). As feminist history is often misrepresented as purely secular, the exclusion of religion forms an 'epistemic habit' (a way of making sense of the world) within academic feminism (Vuola, 2016). Religion is frequently an afterthought in international development, leading to its exclusion from international frameworks (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler, 2020). But research shows that religious affiliation, when intersecting with gender, class and geography, significantly shapes the status and lived experiences of marginalised women, especially from religious minorities.

Given that religion transmits power, its influence extends across nested social systems, shaping the environments in which VAW unfolds. Within these layered systems, religion intersects with other power structures at different levels—such as patriarchy, gender inequality, classism, ageism, xenophobia and racism—creating complex dynamics that influence both vulnerability and resilience (Chavis and Hill, 2008). However, feminist critiques often conflate religion with patriarchal religious constructs, overlooking its useful functions, such as coping.

Heise (1998), whose work was discussed in previous chapter, offers a widely used socioecological framework for researching abuse which identifies a range

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of factors operating at individual, relational, community and societal levels that influence both the perpetration of violence and the vulnerability of survivors. At the individual level, religious beliefs may shape personal coping mechanisms and moral frameworks. At the relationship level, religious practices and constructs may inform family dynamics and gender roles. At the community level, religious organisations can either support survivors or reinforce stigma. And at the societal level, religious ideas may be embedded in immigration laws, policies and cultural narratives that normalise or challenge violence against refugees and migrants. Religion's influence within the socioecological model is thus both pervasive and layered.

Integrating an intersectional and socioecological approach matters, as it enables engagement with the multidimensional functions of religion—both risk and protective factors—operating across nested social systems throughout displacement. Applying this framework reveals the dual role of religion, functioning as a dynamic driver of vulnerability and resilience, discussed next. This complexity is explored in the following discussion, building on a wider SEREDA[1] enquiry into SGBV in forced migration with Pertek et al. (2023) conceptualising religion as both a protective and risk factor, offering cross-contextual insights into how religion shapes displaced women's experiences.

But I argue that the distinction between risk and protective factors is blurred because the same religious framework can operate in multiple ways—disempowering, liberating or even empowering within an otherwise oppressive system (Askeland and Døhlie, 2015). These roles are context-dependent and interpreted differently by believers. For instance, a practice considered protective, such as religious coping, may involve negative strategies like spiritual struggles (such as self-blame) that exacerbate harm (e.g. enduring abuse). Conversely, what external observers might perceive as limiting agency—a presumed risk—can function as a protective mechanism, enabling women to negotiate or resist structural constraints (Mahmood, 2005). Thus, handling religion requires care and sensitivity towards its multiple functions (James, 2011).

Conceptual framework

The above concepts give rise to the integrated intersectional–socioecological framework outlined in Figure 2.1 which engages with the two sides of religion as source of vulnerability and resource of resilience in a violence continuum. It presents intersecting risk and protective factors which often blur across three nested levels—micro (individual and interpersonal), meso (community) and

[1] SEREDA stands for 'Sexual and gender-based violence in the refugee crisis: from displacement to arrival'. Project website: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/projects/sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-the-refugee-crisis-sereda (accessed 14 May 2026).

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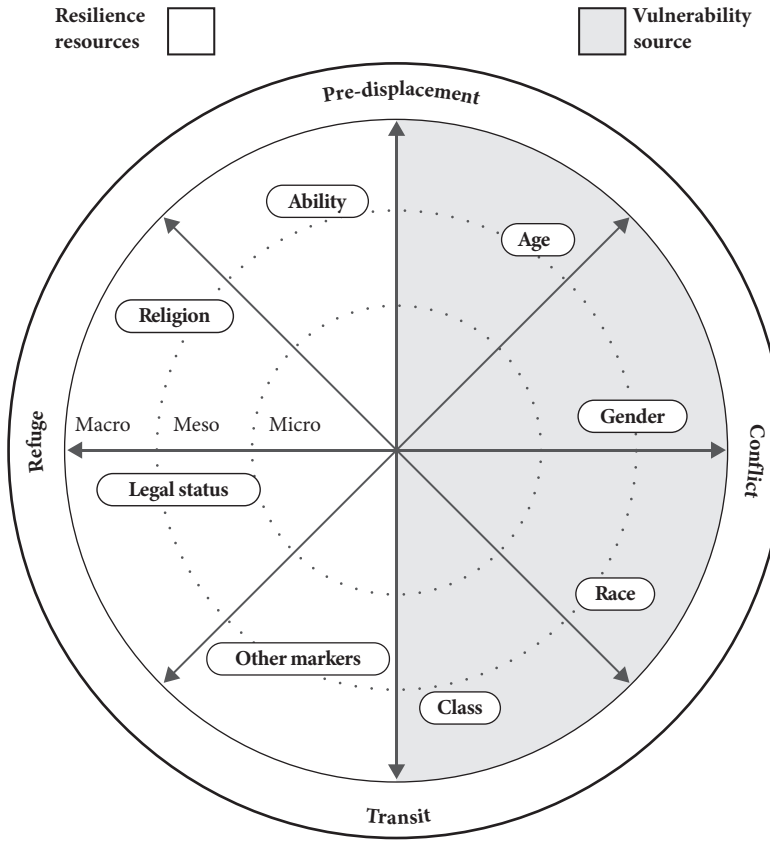


Figure 2.1 An integrated intersectional and socioecological framework

macro (societal and structural). The circular structure reflects the sensitivity to time and space (thereafter temporospatial) of displacement, indicating that these influences evolve across stages of pre-migration, conflict, transit and refuge. The cross-cutting social identity markers help to locate religion as intersecting with gender and other traits in the continuum at different levels. The integrated framework accounts for determinants of violence, including individual characteristics, situational and contextual factors through which survivors experience abuse and express resilience, such as wider policies and mobility restrictions. An integrated approach, thus, connects the multiple and intersecting oppressions embedded in the social system based on different axes of inequalities which play out differently between and among women. The framework, thus, can be adapted in research and practice to centre on any other intersecting identity or type of harm to account for diverse groups of women and aid actors. In the case of religion, these comprise

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religious actors, including faith-based organisations (FBOs), religious leaders and faith communities.

Before applying this framework, I explain the concept of social identity, focusing on religious identity, as a fluid and relational concept underpinning this book.

Contesting religious identity

Identity is socially constructed, dynamic and relational, emerging from shifting interactions between individuals and their social environments (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). As a sociocultural group marker, it is produced through social processes that locate individuals within particular groups (Pittaway and Pittaway, 2004). Some intersectional scholars, however, caution against reducing identity to fixed categories, arguing instead that research should attend to how multiple and overlapping social markers converge to produce inequalities (McCall, 2001; Mirza, 2013). The religious identity of displaced women has long been silenced and remains an understudied intersectional category. Western women's conceptualisations of the experiences of women from the Global South have often framed them as powerless victims of their culture or religion (Spivak, 1988). Sometimes religion was even instrumentalised to progress foreign aid or national military agendas (Abu-Lughod, 2002), among others, obscuring and complicating the image of Islam in the international arena.

Despite this misrepresentation, religion remains an integral part of forced migrants' identities. It shapes their daily practices, moral commitments and basic needs (Abdulaziz et al., 2016). Religious identity is constantly constructed and re-constructed in migration processes that influence and are influenced by shifts or losses (Kassam, 2016). For example, facing religious discrimination, displaced women may reformulate their religious identities. Religious ideas and expressions acquired during socialisation, as fluid, may be altered during migratory processes presenting new opportunities for religious identity formation and practice (Knott, 2016). For many displaced women, religious identity influences routines, family life, health practices, mobility, social interactions and participation in rituals or communal life. It also shapes the social and moral contexts in which experiences of VAW are interpreted and responded to.

Belonging to multiple social groups simultaneously produces both privilege and exclusion. Religion, thus, can serve as both a source of inequality, discrimination, stigma and oppression that can in turn create a potential framework for resilience and empowerment for marginalised minority groups (cf. Askeland and Døhlie, 2015; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Ghafournia, 2017). The two sides of religion reflected in Figure 2.1 are explored throughout the chapter by referring to a range of concepts, analysing how religious beliefs and identities can shape both vulnerability and resilience across different levels.

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Religion sourcing vulnerability

Within the conceptual model, religion is identified as a source of vulnerability and risk factor. Arguing that religious construct can contribute to women's vulnerability to VAW, I critically discuss the intersection of religion and vulnerability, which is rarely discussed in relation to displaced women. A number of theories provide conceptual tools that help understand religion as vulnerability. Starting from the theory of vulnerability, I focus on evidence on the nexus of religion, patriarchy, socio-cultural norms and religious identity as sources of vulnerability.

Vulnerability (from *volnus*, Latin for 'wound') is a contested concept in social theory. It relates to the inherent human capacity for fragility, susceptibility to suffering and dependence on others. Fineman (2008) defines vulnerability as 'a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition', later expanding this to the idea of *universal vulnerability* (2017), which acknowledges that all individuals may become vulnerable due to failures in social institutions. She introduces the notion of *vulnerable life situations*, which avoids stigmatising specific groups by shifting the focus from fixed categories to contextual experiences. In contrast, Crenshaw (2000) introduces *intersectional vulnerability*, describing the unique and compounded vulnerabilities experienced by women whose identities intersect across multiple axes of marginalisation. For displaced women, these will frequently be their legal status as a barrier to work and accessing services, social discrimination and isolation. These structural factors often exacerbate how the nexus between religion, patriarchy and socio-cultural norms shapes women's experiences across displacement.

Religion, patriarchy and socio-cultural norms

Religion operates in intersection with patriarchy and social norms. Religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisation may contribute to VAW beyond pre-migration settings, and these often travel with migrants across borders, continuously shaping their attitudes and behaviours. This section operationalises the conceptual framework at the risk domain, identifying how religious beliefs and identities can shape vulnerability.

The intersection of religion, culture and gender has been described as a 'unholy trinity' conspiring in the abuse of women (Nadar, 2005). Feminist discourse has long used the concept of patriarchy—literally 'rule of the father' and ideas that justify male domination and gender disparities in power across cultures (Ahmad et al., 2004). Patriarchal cultural norms, reinforcing unequal power dynamics, shape religious interpretations of scriptures which can justify spousal violence, harmful practices and encourage women's submission. Conversely, culturally influenced religious beliefs can reinforce patriarchal attitudes driving VAW

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(Pertek, 2020). Sacred texts across faith traditions may prescribe women's obedience and submission to male authority. Heise (1998) cites passages from the Bible (Ephesians 5:22–23) and the Skandapurana (a Hindu text) that depict women as silent and subordinate. These religious prescriptions can contribute to cultural violence, legitimising gender hierarchies and shaping the 'chosen vs. unchosen' dichotomy (Galtung, 1990). Patriarchal readings of sacred texts have historically confined women to domestic roles, relegating them to unpaid care work while men assume leadership and economic responsibilities (Ferris, 2011). These interpretations, rooted in specific historical and geographic contexts, can be misused across settings, contributing to violence and to gender inequality.

Some patriarchal religious constructs often shape the masculine sociocultural and religious norms and hierarchical gender relations which underpin unequitable power dynamics, sustaining VAW. For instance, scriptural allegories—such as Eve's creation from Adam's rib or her being blamed for original sin—have shaped beliefs in male superiority (Ashrof, 2005; Hassan, 1995). In some cases, religious beliefs are used to legitimise corporal punishment or deny the existence of marital rape, citing reciprocal marital rights (Ashrof, 2005; Heise et al., 1996; Kalra & Bhugra, 2013).

Patriarchal interpretations contribute to a broader environment of symbolic violence, where male dominance is naturalised and women's agency is constrained. In contexts of religiously sanctioned violence, symbolic violence offers a useful lens to understand how religious beliefs and practices can incite interpersonal harm. Bourdieu (1977, 2001) describes symbolic violence as a subtle, often unconscious form of domination embedded in everyday behaviours, language and rituals. It emerges from a cosmological order that appears natural to insiders, who reproduce it as part of their lived reality. In religious contexts, symbolic violence may manifest through teachings and practices that reinforce gender hierarchies.

Across religious traditions, beliefs surrounding marital duty, obedience and forgiveness can constrain survivors' help-seeking, particularly where suffering is framed as a divine test or moral virtue (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Chavis & Hill, 2008). Emphasis on family unity, the sanctity of marriage and male authority often leads women to justify abuse, internalise guilt and adopt religiously valorised virtues—such as patience, silence and reconciliation—to preserve family reputation. Family honour concerns are discussed in Chapter 4. In contexts where purity, modesty and restricted gender interaction are central norms, experiences of violence generate spiritual suffering and self-blame, with fear of communal judgement for violating sexual expectations further deterring disclosure. Survivors may endure abuse silently, believing that suffering in this life will be rewarded in the hereafter (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). This spiritual framing can reshape belief systems and reinforce vulnerability (Ahmad et al., 2004), entrenching shame and inhibiting help-seeking (James, 2010). Religious and cultural norms also shape survivors' meaning of violence and coping practices. For instance, among Kenya's

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Oromo community, survivors adopted the *niqab* to avoid recognition after sexual assault but refrained from seeking support due to taboos around intimate relations, experiencing social ostracism and stigma, including exclusion from marriage and associations with sex work or HIV/AIDS (Hough, 2013).

At the community level, internal dynamics and social norms—often rooted in religious and cultural traditions—also play a central role in shaping community attitudes toward gender and violence. There is a diversity of opinion among faith communities concerning gender issues, religious concepts and survivors' own beliefs and practices (Crisp et al., 2018). Religious interpretations, patriarchal norms and cultural traditions often intersect to produce environments where VAW is normalised or justified. For example, in Jakobsen's study (2014, 2016) in Tanzania, Christian and Muslim community members viewed partner violence as 'good' because it upheld social order and gender roles. Consent and coercion were seen as intertwined, with violence reinforcing norms that women themselves supported (Jakobsen, 2014, 2016). Also, extreme stigma around VAW in faith communities can intensify psychological trauma. Survivors are often stigmatised and blamed for dishonouring their families, which diminishes the severity of abuse and discourages disclosure (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004). For instance, in Malawi's Dzaleka Refugee Camp, family members, neighbours and community leaders both contested and reinforced patriarchal norms that ascribed male authority within the family and normalised wife-beating as a form of 'legitimate discipline' (Carlson, 2005).

At societal level, while religious traditions are diverse, research suggests that patterns of patriarchal harm reoccur across faith communities that may submit to social norms that normalise abuse. VAW in faith communities remains a sensitive taboo, especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including rape and intimate partner-violence (Tomkins et al., 2015). Religious organisations may tolerate or fail to address violence, leaving survivors unsupported (Chavis & Hill, 2008). Differences in conceptualising violence—rooted in religious cosmologies—require socio-religious sensitivity in interventions (Istratii, 2020).

Religious identity and vulnerability

Religion, as a dynamic force and integral part of migrant identity, shapes women's vulnerability. It operates as a dynamic risk factor across pre-migration, conflict and flight, transit and refuge—creating complex intersections between belief systems, social norms and structural harms—such as restrictive immigration policies, poverty and social exclusion—to compound vulnerability. Before displacement, as discussed above, at the individual and community level, socio-cultural religious norms often reinforce patriarchal structures that normalise violence and silence

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survivors into enduring abuse as a religious duty, while divorce may be stigmatised as shameful or forbidden (Pertek et al., 2023). These norms travel with survivors, shaping decisions and behaviours across migration contexts. Spiritual violence—where survivors are made to feel guilty or insufficiently religious—may further entrench control. Also, religious-only marriages often create long-term legal and financial insecurity, leaving women without civil protections (ibid).

During conflict, religious identity can become a trigger for displacement. Women belonging to religious minorities or specific sects may face targeted violence and persecution, while extremist regimes impose rigid rituals and discriminatory gender norms that violate religious freedom and force some to flee their homes. Historical and contemporary examples further illustrate compounded persecution of women due to their intersecting identities. For instance, ethnically and religiously motivated sexual violence has been used as a tool of ethnic cleansing and genocide, as seen in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and East Timor, where women were raped to shame communities and forcibly impregnated (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). More recently, groups such as Daesh and Boko Haram have targeted Yazidi, Christian and Muslim girls for sexual slavery and forced marriage (Pearson & Zenn, 2021), demonstrating how religious identity continues to be weaponised in conflict and displacement. Nonetheless, religion is frequently treated as a secondary or problematic identity, rather than as a central intersecting factor.

In transit zones and refuge, visible religious practices—such as wearing hijab—may trigger abuse and exclusion, limiting access to work and safety. Religious profiling at borders conflates faith with extremism, subjecting both women and men to harassment and psychological violence by humiliation. Religious affiliation is often racialised—where racial meaning is assigned to religion—essentialising identities and heightening exposure to harm (Joshi, 2016). Race becomes a proxy of religion, resulting in essentialising and reducing an individual's social identity to one dimension of their identity (ibid). Racial and ethnic identities can sometimes be misperceived or imposed by observers who overlook individuals' actual religious identities.[2]

The amalgamation of religious and racial identities (Garner and Selod, 2015), especially in the case of Muslim and Arab women, contributes to 'othering' practices embedded in social relations (Mirza, 2013). Women visibly associated with stigmatised religious groups, such as Muslim women wearing headscarves in various Western countries of immigration, are disproportionately targeted (Šeta, 2016). Their bodies become symbolic battlegrounds in broader ideological conflicts, with Islamophobic discourses framing them as oppressed or dangerous

[2] For instance, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and South Asian Christians can be mislabelled as Muslims based on appearance, making them targets of rising anti-Muslim violence in Western countries—violence that has resulted in injuries, humiliation and even fatalities (Joshi, 2016: 137).

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(Mirza, 2013; Sahraoui, n.d.). The 2016 refugee crisis intensified anti-Muslim sentiment across Europe, resulting in thousands of hate crimes and assaults (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018).

Islamophobia, as a form of racism (Allen, 2010), fuels hostility not only through hate speech but also through physical and sexual violence, often perpetrated by unknown men—non-family members acting from prejudice and hate (Šeta, 2016). The 'war against terror' ideology pathologises Muslim women as voiceless and subordinates and depicts the image of a 'barbaric Muslim other' (Mirza, 2013: 6).[3] The contentions around Muslim women's attire (especially a hijab), which essentialise them to notions of ethnicity and religion, objectify them and '*otherize them as oppressed*' (ibid: 411). These gendered and racialised dynamics extend into service provision, including health and psychosocial support, shelter and legal advice, where survivors may experience discriminatory practices when seeking support, such as being asked to remove religious attire or being confronted with stereotypes about Islam condoning abuse (Pertek et al., 2023). Such experiences undermine mental health and deter access to essential services, revealing how religious identity can shape both exposure to violence and barriers to recovery.

The boundary between VAW and hate crime is often blurred. While some forms of VAW are motivated partly or entirely by religious hostility toward a woman's religious identity, these incidents might not be recognised and categorised as hate crimes by frontline officers and law enforcement and/or by survivors and victims themselves (Gagliardi et al., 2023). Meantime, efforts to classify gender-based violence—including VAW—as hate crime are frequently resisted (DeKeseredy, 2008; Perry, 2014). As a result, such acts are more commonly framed as forms of religious discrimination, rather than as intersecting gendered and religious harms (Halrynjo & Jonker, 2015). This disconnect is particularly visible in immigration and resettlement contexts, where sexual violence against forced migrants is seldom acknowledged as hate crime, even when affected communities believe that survivors were targeted because of their religion. In these cases, both forms of hostility—gendered and religious—constitute identity-based harms that are experienced simultaneously and intersectionally. Treating gender motivated hostility and VAW as distinct from hate crime obscures the gendered dimensions of violence, making such harms appear normal or disconnected from broader systems of inequality (Walters & Tumath, 2014). In response, some scholars argue that sexual violence should be recognised within hate crime frameworks, suggesting that concepts like 'gender hostility' better capture the motives of perpetrators and the lived experiences of survivors (ibid). However, legislative gaps, high evidential thresholds and institutional resistance continue to prevent gender from being included as a protected characteristic in hate crime law across different jurisdictions (Gagliardi et al., 2023).

[3] Labelling Muslim refugee women as backward or fearful is part of structural injustice and such bias in VAW interventions may cause harm and disempower those seeking protection.

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In addition, in countries of asylum, religion continues to shape survivors' vulnerability. Simplified or decontextualised readings of scriptures can reinforce patriarchal constructs and silence domestic violence, which is frequently treated as a private issue (Chavis and Hill, 2008). Religious leaders sometimes advise women to remain in abusive relationships to uphold family values, while partners may manipulate religious authority to silence victims who fear reporting due to risks of deportation (Pertek et al., 2023). Lack of civil marriage documentation leaves women legally unprotected, restricting access to welfare and divorce. Visible symbols of faith, such as hijab, expose women to discrimination in employment, reinforcing economic dependency on abusers.

Finally, the gender–patriarchy–culture nexus may be exacerbated in refuge, increasing domestic violence as gender roles shift during displacement. For example, unemployment may undermine men's traditional breadwinner role, while women's entry into income-generating activities challenges pre-existing family norms. This perceived threat to patriarchal expectations can trigger feelings of failure and frustration, which may escalate into violence as men seek to regain power and control (Logie et al., 2017).

The empirical evidence discussed above supports the argument that religious constructs contribute to women's vulnerability to VAW across socio-ecological levels and intersect with other factors, such as migration. Conversely, evidence also highlights religion's dual role in fostering resilience, enabling women to challenge abuse and reclaim agency, as explored next.

Religion resourcing resilience

As outlined in the conceptual model (Figure 2.1), religion is a resilience resource and protective factor. Arguing that religious functions enhance resilience and coping in displacement, I discuss how religious resources and coping processes enable the adaptation and recovery for women in different settings. The intersection of religion and resilience is multidimensional and widely researched across disciplines, including forced migration, but less frequently with reference to displaced women survivors. A number of theories provide conceptual tools that help understand religion as a resilience factor. Starting from the theory of resilience and ecological approaches to psychological trauma (Harvey, 1996), I focus on two theories, conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) and religious coping theory (Pargament, 1997), which provide useful resources for understanding the place of religion.

The term 'resilience' (from *resiliere*, Latin for 'bounce back') was first introduced by Holling in ecology (1973: 14) as 'the persistence of [ecological] systems and their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations and state variables'. This definition

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has evolved in social theory into describing the capacity of individuals and communities to persist, adapt and transform in unpredicted situations of coping with external stressors (Adger, 2000).

In short, resilience can be regarded as an 'antidote' to vulnerability (Fineman, 2017), which begins to take shape from early childhood. In trauma research resilience is described as the ability to maintain relatively healthy functioning during disruptive events. Bonanno (2004) argues that people facing potential trauma are commonly resilient and develop sometimes unexpected pathways to resilience. Resilience means return to original functioning or successful adaptation after the exposure to a stressful event by drawing on coping, adaptive and transformative capacities (Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013: 10–11). Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualised resilience as shaped by multiple, interacting environmental systems, giving rise to ecological systems theory, which underpins this book's socioecological approach, as discussed below.

From an ecological perspective on resilience, trauma is often multi-layered, shaped by social identity and historical context and may be perceived as 'normal' within certain cultural frameworks, complicating definitions of trauma and resilience in multicultural settings. In the context of VAW and displacement, notably, harm done by sexual violence is more than a single trauma (Wasco, 2003). To include cultural and spiritual dimensions, clinical models of trauma have increasingly shifted toward holistic approaches (Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani, 2012). Resilience is not merely a personal characteristic but is a context-dependent interconnection between vulnerability and protective factors within specific social environments (Mohaupt, 2009) that evolves across time and place. Ecological and social justice approaches to resilience advocate for shared responsibility across institutions and society to create conditions that enable coping (Hart et al., 2016). This call must extend to account for displaced women, who are frequently neglected by multiple systems.

Both culture and religion, as interlinked, shape how trauma is experienced and how resilience is expressed. Religious beliefs, similarly to culture, mediate emotional experience and expression (Harvey, 1996), influencing how individuals respond to adversity and shape interpretations of stressors and desired outcomes (Harrison et al., 2001). A multicultural understanding of trauma recognises diverse healing patterns and adaptive responses among ethnic minorities that differ from Western norms (Tummala-Narra, 2007). A multi-determined and context-specific approach to resilience emphasises the importance of social location and structural factors, acknowledging that social identities and belonging can be both a resource for recovery and a source of distress (Tummala-Narra, 2007). A cross-cultural lens involves exploring personal, development, community influences and cultural attitudes that shape resilience and self-perception (ibid: 37). For instance, life transitions or 'turning points' in trauma adaptation are often shaped by wider beliefs and family and community traits (ibid: 36).

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Harvey's (1996) ecological model of psychological trauma offers a multidimensional framework for understanding resilience and recovery. It highlights the interaction between the individual, the traumatic event and the environment. Personal factors (e.g. age, coping skills, cultural beliefs), event characteristics (e.g. severity, humiliation, presence of witnesses) and environmental context (e.g. support systems, safety, community attitudes) influence the recovery process. These factors shape the survivor's ecological fit—the quality of their connection to their social environment—which can foster belonging, reduce isolation and promote positive coping. In forced migration contexts, hostile environments and limited access to care often leave survivors vulnerable to exploitation. Legal barriers, social exclusion, stigma and fear of discrimination further restrict access to clinical support. Harvey's model offers a valuable lens for examining the intersection of trauma, displacement and structural inequalities, helping to identify both vulnerability and protective factors in trauma healing.

Resilience theory has been critiqued for 'responsibilising' individuals, expecting them to endure injustice regardless of their circumstances, while society and the state withdraw from addressing structural inequalities (Hart et al., 2016). These criticisms are relevant to the structural conditions in which displaced people are entangled. Furthermore, resilience scholarship shaped by Western epistemologies has been disputed for paying little attention to religion (Hawkes et al., 2020), limiting the applicability of resilience frameworks in faith communities and imposing Western conceptualisations onto diverse cultural settings. Resilience theory often fails to question denials of agency or oppressive powers and lacks clarity on resilience 'of what', 'for whom' and 'at what cost to which others' (Cote and Nightingale, 2012). Addressing these gaps for displaced women requires attending to the severe impacts of VAW, which are key to understanding their resilience.

Everyday resistance

The boundary between resistance and resilience, in co-producing coping mechanisms, is often porous, particularly when survival strategies blur in evolving contexts of displacement. Resistance can be constituted by subtle, covert practices such as avoidance, symbolic gestures or quiet acts of non-compliance that undermine domination without direct confrontation (Mahmood, 2005; Scott, 1985).

There is a place for religion in resistance strategies. For instance, Muslim and Christian feminist thinkers challenge secular portrayals of women of faith as passive victims. Resistance is not exclusively oppositional but can be embedded in compliance (Mahmood, 2005). Agency may be exercised through negotiating norms rather than rejecting them outright, revealing how women assert autonomy within, rather than outside, cultural and religious frameworks. This challenges Western liberal conceptions of resistance as inherently rebellious, instead situates

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agency in practices that reconfigure meaning—such as adopting modest dress to expand mobility or leveraging faith-based roles for influence. These acts illustrate resistance as relational and contextually embedded, rather than external to social structures.

Reframing religious resources

Multiple studies show that displaced populations draw on a range of coping strategies—personal qualities (e.g. courage, patience), social support (family, ethnic communities) and religious faith across different regions. Systematic reviews on refugee women's resilience show the centrality of religion in their resilience and coping (Hawkes et al., 2020). Religion operates as a key protective factor for displaced women. A SEREDA study, with over 150 Levantine and African survivors in four host countries, identified that around one-third of research participants deployed religion to endure perilous journeys and rebuild their lives (Pertek et al., 2023). Pre-migration, religious beliefs and practices served as emotional anchors for women experiencing violence. During conflict and forced departure, religion became a lifeline. In transit zones, religious practices provided therapeutic relief—survivors prayed and read scripture to regulate emotions, reduce suicidal ideation and distract from trauma. Similarly, Vietnamese refugees found solace in prayer during sea crossings (Dorais, 2007). In countries of asylum, religion continued to nurture resilience and recovery; for instance, Sudanese refugees in Australia used faith to cope with isolation and despair (Khawaja et al., 2008), and post-conflict Ethiopian communities drew strength from spirituality and social ties (Abebe, 2009). Faith operates as a buffer against psychological and physiological distress, as seen among IDPs in Kenya, with survivors drawing strength from prayer, religious texts, communal worship and support from faith-based organisations (FBOs) (Parsitau, 2011).

Evidence suggests religion is a compelling and accessible resource among displaced populations in refuge (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011). Religious beliefs shape cognitive processes—self-perception, meaning-making and emotional regulation—which are crucial for resilience (Khawaja et al., 2008). A daily coping mechanism among diverse ethnic and migrant communities has been described as 'faith resilience' (Ögtem-Young, 2018). Survivors of VAW often turn to prayer and scripture for comfort. In Ghafournia's (2017) study, immigrant women in Australia described prayer and reading a religious script as their only refuge during domestic violence. Religious identity also facilitates social bonding, bridging and linking (Knott, 2016), which are essential for recovery and community resilience. In sum, religion is not only a source of spiritual comfort but also a social and psychological resource that helps forced migrants navigate trauma and rebuild identity.

Furthermore, religious actors have played key roles in combating VAW in various fragile contexts (Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). In the context of displacement

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and failed states, faith-based organisations (FBOs) offer a variety of basic services to survivors of VAW, including education, health services, emergency shelter, safe spaces for refugee women and children, psychosocial support, spiritual and pastoral care (Ager et al., 2015). Religious leaders are widely recognised as influential actors in tackling VAW. Drawing on their moral authority and community trust, they can either reinforce harmful gender norms or actively challenge them. Also, arguing that patriarchal interpretations—not religion itself—are responsible for legitimising violence, feminist theologians and female religious leaders have reinterpreted sacred texts from egalitarian perspectives (Wadud, 1999; Kalmanofsky, 2017).

Drawing on literature synthesis, this chapter concludes by proposing a heuristic typology of religious resources for adaptation and recovery in displacement in Table 2.1. The non-exhaustive list of religious resources aligns with the

Table 2.1 Religious resources at different levels of socioecology (Pertek, 2024)

Individual, interpersonal	*Community*	*Societal and structural*
Individual religious beliefs	Congregational religious practices and rituals (prayers, litany, vigils, pilgrimage, breaking the fast etc.)	Faith-based organisations
Personal religious practices (prayers, supplications, fasting, reading scriptures etc.)	School religious education	Religious institutions
Memorised religious scriptures and knowledge	Places of worship	Wider religious teachings and norms
Audio recordings of scriptures	Religious holidays, religious celebrations, rites, festivals	Religious scriptures and books
Peer support	Religious ceremonies (weddings, birth ceremonies, burials)	Religious TV and radio channels
Religious practices with family and close neighbours	Trusted community members	Talks online
Religious lectures	Women's faith support groups	National religious holidays
Religious books	Other support groups	Alms collected nationally and internationally
Prophetic metaphors	Group loans, alms/donations	Endowments
Principles and emotions (e.g. forgiveness, mercifulness, gratitude, kindness)	Endowments	Sacred places
Modest attire	Safe spaces	Faith-based rights to receive support
Food selection	Support from FBOs	Religious schools and universities
Home decoration,	Volunteering,	
Individual alms/donations	Consultations with faith leaders	
Loans, endowments	Traditional medicine and healing practices	

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conceptual model, Figure 2.1, in illustrating assets available at different levels. This typology offers a framework to explore how religious resources operate in diverse displacement contexts and include different types of assets such as intellectual, cultural, ethical, emotional, material, mental, moral, physical, social and spiritual. For instance, at the micro level, personal beliefs and practices influence coping and help-seeking; at the meso level, local faith communities and women's groups provide social support or reinforce harmful norms; and at the macro level, faith-based organisations (FBOs), local faith actors, religious leaders and faith-based financing mechanisms interact with humanitarian systems.

Extending Conservation of Resources

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) offers a valuable lens for understanding resilience in the violence continuum and displacement. It views religion as a resource in managing stress. In particular, it looks at how culture and communities shape what is considered a resource within broader analyses of social context in which displaced women navigate daily challenges. COR is a resource-based framework for understanding stress and resilience, which this book adapts to religious resources. COR theory enables an explanation for how survivors of VAW navigate trauma by relying on culturally specific and personal resources, even in unfamiliar environments where previously relied on coping strategies may be inaccessible.

In the context of forced migration, refugees face a range of stressors—including discrimination, VAW and war trauma—that may erode their resource base. According to COR theory, individuals' efforts to obtain, retain, protect and foster valued resources is central to stress responses. In situations of loss, people apply resource conservation strategies, adapting by mobilising accessible assets or generating new ones. Successful adaptation can replenish resources, while failed adaptation leads to secondary losses, compounding distress and reducing future coping capacity. COR is grounded in the primacy of resource loss and of resource investment. Loss has a disproportionate psychological impact and predicts trauma outcomes, such as PTSD. Individuals invest resources to protect against loss and to recover and build new assets. Those with more resources are better equipped to cope, while those with fewer are more vulnerable to further loss and may adopt defensive strategies to conserve what remains.

While a substantial body of research demonstrates that religion and faith function as important resources for managing stress and loss during traumatic events, Hobfoll (2001: 342) identifies only one faith-related strategy—'involvement in church, synagogue, etc.'—among seventy-four validated factors. This limited recognition suggests a theoretical gap in and the limitations of COR theory: despite acknowledging the influence of culture and community in stress responses, Hobfoll's framework engages only minimally with faith, religion and spirituality.

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As culture and religion are deeply interlinked, this omission overlooks critical dimensions of how individuals and communities draw on religious and spiritual assets to foster resilience.

Nonetheless, COR theory provides a framework for exploring coping and trauma recovery and has potential for underpinning an inventory of religious assets relevant in stress response. Given that resource primacy is shaped by biology, culture and socialisation, it is likely that religious resources rank highly among survivors from faith-based backgrounds. While displacement often disrupts social networks, thereby diminishing access to communal resources, the asset pool may shift as identities evolve in exile.

Applying intersectional and ecological analysis to COR theory enables the exploration of how displaced women of varying backgrounds and in different social contexts mobilise cultural and religious resources to manage stress. The distinct ways in which people activate their internal and external resources to adapt or recover also vary significantly with cultural context and diversity of social identities (Harvey and Tummalanarra, 2007). For many displaced women, the essential strategy of surviving VAW and other intersecting types of violence, including racial violence, is a strong attachment to their communities and access to faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local faith groups that offer support. For example, Iraqi immigrant women in Australia mobilised prayers and religious spaces (such as mosques) for mutual support to overcome hardships (Shabbar, 2012). Yet, refugees predominantly experience a loss of, or disturbance in, their social networks.

Understanding religious coping

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural responses that individuals use to manage stress that exceeds their resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Scholars often categorise coping into dichotomies: active versus passive, engagement versus disengagement and problem-focused versus emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused coping involves direct action to address stressors—such as planning and help-seeking—while emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional distress through acceptance, denial, reappraisal and religious coping.

Since the 1990s, religion has gained recognition as a significant coping resource, particularly within psychiatry, psychotherapy and clinical psychology. Scholarship has increasingly examined how faith, religion and spirituality function as resilience resources in contexts of adversity. Religious coping can be both personal, through sacred meaning-making, and social, via religious networks. It is increasingly viewed as a resilience mechanism, enhancing psychological stability and wellbeing (Adam and Ward, 2016).

While spirituality can be protective (Harrison et al., 2001), it may also reinforce passivity and psychological distress when trauma is interpreted as divine punishment or when surrender to God's will becomes the sole coping strategy

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(Pargament et al., 1998). Spiritual struggles may trigger depression and hopelessness or, conversely, catalyse personal growth and transformation—for example, through identification with scriptural figures who endured suffering (Pargament et al., 2005). Emotion-focused coping, including denial and guilt, may deter survivors from seeking help or taking action (Shannon et al., 2006).

Scholars have developed several approaches to measure religious coping. Pargament et al. (2000) introduced the RCOPE, later refined into the Brief RCOPE (BRCOPE) used in this study (see Chapter 5 of this volume), which assesses both positive religious coping (PRC)—such as seeking comfort, meaning and support through faith—and negative religious coping (NRC), including spiritual struggle, punitive appraisals and feelings of divine abandonment. PRC is commonly associated with posttraumatic growth, life satisfaction and multidimensional wellbeing (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Pargament et al., 2011). Conversely, NRC correlates with psychological distress, anxiety and depression (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Posttraumatic growth has been documented among forced migrants and survivors of sexual assault, who often report improved mental health, assertiveness and spirituality years after trauma (Frazier et al., 2004).

In non-migration contexts, cultural and religious beliefs are recognised for supporting VAW survivors in enduring suffering and buffering trauma. Religious coping—through prayer, rituals and metaphors of survival—offers structure, meaning and emotional relief. Some rape survivors use religious coping to reframe their experiences, forgive and move towards healing (Smith and Kelly, 2001). Spiritual struggles and resources can both hinder leaving abusive relationships and support healing, acceptance and reconciliation through religious reappraisal (Mahoney et al., 2015). These struggles, often seen as 'turning points', are not inherently negative. Spirituality, understood as seeking meaning in stress through the sacred, influences how women make decisions and interpret their circumstances. High levels of religious coping often coincide with intense psychological and spiritual distress—suggesting that greater suffering prompts deeper spiritual engagement (Mahoney et al., 2015). Similarly, survivors of sexual assault in the US frequently used faith-based coping, deriving meaning and support from spiritual beliefs (Ahrens et al., 2010). However, negative religious coping was also prevalent—80% used religion to avoid confronting trauma, and nearly half reported religious discontent, including anger toward God and disappointment with clergy. Sexual assault can also alter religiosity among different social groups. Scholars also found that religious coping supports post-traumatic growth and spiritual wellbeing, potentially protecting survivors from the psychological consequences of sexual trauma (Frazier et al., 2004). Religious coping offers survivors of VAW a framework for meaning-making and emotional regulation.

Forced migration scholarship increasingly acknowledges religion, faith and spirituality as vital coping and resilience resources, buffering migration-related stress. For displaced survivors, these resources intersect with a complex range of

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migration- and violence-related stressors. In displacement contexts, religion's dual role in the lives of survivors—reinforcing, empowering and constraining resilience and mental health—demands nuanced analysis. Religious coping, for instance, has been shown to alleviate acculturative stress among Muslim immigrants (Adam and Ward, 2016), through personal connection with God, religious practices and community ties. Yet, despite its relevance, drawing on religion as a supportive base remains underexplored in forced migration research, with only a few studies examining coping patterns among displaced VAW survivors.

For example, while prayer and Qur'anic recitation offered solace to Muslim women survivors of domestic violence in the US, traditional beliefs also discouraged help-seeking and promoted acceptance of suffering (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). The melodic nature of Qur'anic recitation inspired comfort via personal recitation or listening to audio recordings among survivors seeking healing (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). Similarly, Hindu women in Rajasthan navigated patriarchal religious structures while using rituals and informal spaces to resist VAW (Bradley, 2010). In some cases, religious practices can even influence perpetrators; for instance, abusive husbands may pause violence when their wives pray (Zakar et al., 2012). In addition, among trafficked immigrant women in Italy, faith operated as a protective factor linked to coping flexibility and resilience, shaped by pre-migration resources such as kinship and temperament (Gianesini, 2018). In northern Iraq, 90% of displaced Yazidi respondents identified God as their primary source of support (Strang et al., 2020), underscoring the centrality of religious resources in trauma recovery.

Blurred boundaries: religion, risk and protection

So far, this chapter has argued for recognising religious influences as sources of vulnerability, and resources of resilience, drawing on empirical and theoretical evidence showing that religion operates across the socioecological system—as personal meaning-making, relational support and organised infrastructures. Theories of COR and religious coping further support this argument, yet how these dynamics translate into protection policy and practice remains underexplored. The enquiry, therefore, shifts to humanitarian response, exploring how the sector engages with religious actors as part of the resources outlined in Table 2.1, including faith leaders, communities and organisations. This shift draws on the conceptual framework which accounts for religion as a resource that can operate as a protective or a risk factor—with blurred boundaries—requiring attention to the conditions under which it supports safety and resilience, and those under which it contributes to harm. For instance, in some settings, religious leaders may condone or condemn abuse, and faith communities may reinforce or counter stigma. The next section thus moves from 'what religion does' in women's lives to look at

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'what humanitarian systems do' with religion and the role of religious actors in protection ecology.

Religious engagement in humanitarian action

The chapter concludes by mapping a landscape of humanitarian engagement with faith, religion and spirituality, as integral parts of intersectional socioecology, identifying gaps in current practice, and outlining implications for faith-sensitive protection. While scholars have argued that humanitarian systems neglect religion (e.g. Ager and Ager, 2015), there is limited scholarship on how humanitarian actors engage with faith actors. Religious engagement takes multiple forms across humanitarian sectors, yet no universal definition of the term exists. Here, *religious engagement* refers to organisational and individual efforts to work with lived religion and to understand how religious and secular dynamics shape outcomes for crisis-affected populations. By situating religious actors in social ecology, I argue that religious engagement is not an optional add on but part of the system that can either enhance harm or protection. This invites a discussion on how the humanitarian sector engages with religious resources, such as local, national and international religious actors in forming the intersectional ecology of protection.

Religious engagement in humanitarianism is situated within its historical and ideological context, with roots in Enlightenment rationalism and its emphasis on neutrality, universality and professionalism (Ager and Ager, 2015). However, in seeking to maintain neutrality and independence, humanitarian actors often avoid engaging with religious actors, fearing that such engagement could be misinterpreted as endorsing their religious or political views (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). While the relevance of religious engagement around GBV is acknowledged (Marshall et al., 2021), the efforts to engage with religious actors at international level rarely focus on VAW, illustrating the systemic neglect of religion. Some western governments (e.g. UK, Germany, US) and UN agencies (e.g. UNFPA, UNDP) developed guidance on engaging with religious actors, however these are rarely related to protection.

Since the 2010s, major agencies have begun to formalise collaboration with religious/faith actors. For instance, the United Nations established an Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development. Subsequently, UNHCR has launched the Dialogue on Faith and Protection in 2012 and Welcoming the Stranger initiative in 2013 with a partnership note on FBOs, 'Local Faith Communities and Faith Leaders' in 2014 and the Multi-Religious Council of Leaders in 2021. The Global Compact on Refugees also acknowledges the role of religious actors in fostering social cohesion (UNHCR, 2018). FCDO launched *Declaration of Humanity* to engage faith leaders in addressing CRSV. The EU's Gender Action Plan III explicitly supports the mobilisation of religious actors for gender

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equality. Similarly, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls has documented lessons learned from working with religious actors (Le Roux and Palm, 2021) and the Spotlight Initiative—a global partnership between the EU and the UN—has supported faith-based engagement to eliminate VAW (EC, 2021). In 2017, OHCHR introduced the 'Faith for Rights' framework, a non-binding soft law instrument integrating the faith dimension into international human rights processes.[4]

Despite this international policy framework including religion, disconnects persist between secular and religious actors in GBV/VAW programming, and global guidance on GBV in humanitarian emergencies remains largely silent on religion in operational terms. This pattern reflects an enduring epistemic bias that treats secularity as neutral and religion as potentially problematic, resulting in uneven, ad hoc engagement. Similarly, development practitioners often hold outdated views of secularity as neutral and religion as irrational, rendering Western organisations 'religion-blind' (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020).

Humanitarian efforts are frequently criticised for being driven by donor agendas rather than the actual needs of crisis-affected communities. For instance, some Western donors may prioritise the elimination of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, which might not align with the immediate local priorities (Holloway et al., 2019). Gender programmes are frequently designed in ways that portray refugee communities as backward and traditional, depicting women as needing rescue and men as barbaric and uncivilised (Abu Lughod, 2002). Such a neocolonial and orientalist approach reinforces inequalities between aid organisations and the recipients of their assistance, inadvertently increasing risks by creating unequal resource distribution or providing inadequate services (Olivius, 2016).

Similarly, aid agencies often insufficiently address the cultural and religious needs of displaced women, reflecting epistemic exclusions in humanitarianism. Common gaps include dignity kits lacking culturally appropriate items, limited provision of faith-compliant food options and camp designs that overlook gender-sensitive spatial arrangements, such as the absence of locks and adequate lighting in sanitation facilities. Secular humanitarian frameworks in particular frequently sideline religion in their gender equality and VAW programmes, often regarding laic approaches as inherently superior for addressing gendered issues (Lokot et al., 2024). Yet this avoidance strategy can inadvertently create barriers to supporting displaced women for whom religion may be or may be not central. Anecdotal evidence suggests that religious actors may have greater awareness of the cultural needs of displaced women due to their close proximity to affected communities. Multiple FBOs deploy faith-sensitive methodologies to tackle gender inequality

[4] https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/press/Faith4Rights.pdf (accessed 14 May 2026).

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and VAW in fragile settings (including Tearfund, World Vision, Islamic Relief, Le Roux and Pertek, 2022).

Many actors in the international development community remain hesitant to engage with religion, particularly in the context of VAW (Ager and Ager, 2016; Olivier, 2016; Le Roux and Loots, 2017; Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). This reluctance often stems from misunderstandings or limited comprehension of the role of religion in both perpetuating and preventing violence. Religious actors often face marginalisation in humanitarian policy and programming, and may themselves contribute to limiting cross-sectoral learning and collaboration, as their experiences are frequently siloed within their own faith traditions (Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). Local faith actors face systemic barriers to participation in the international humanitarian system, including lack of formal registration, unfamiliarity with humanitarian standards and terminology and donor biases that question their impartiality and professionalism (Wilkinson and Tomalin, 2025).

Nonetheless, evidence indicates an increasing role of religious actors, as key intermediaries in the localisation of humanitarian assistance (Kraft, 2020), and in shaping transregional aid networks. Growing evidence demonstrates the significance of Southern-led responses, involving local faith communities and refugee-to-refugee aid groups, and the significant role of faith-based responses in supporting displaced women (e.g. Ager et al., 2015), as well as the role of religious leaders (Carpi, 2023; Wilkison, 2018). Local faith-based organisations (FBOs) and religious leaders are often the first responders to crises, offering support in remote areas where formal services are absent (Ferris, 2005), but they remain underrepresented in formal humanitarian systems. For instance, Syrian refugee faith leaders in Lebanon act as intermediaries between international humanitarian actors and local communities (Carpi, 2023). Engaging in humanitarian assistance, as service providers and moral authority, they practice spiritual activism which links with social justice and political resistance and reclaim their socio-spiritual roles in exile. These religious leaders are not merely passive recipients or neutral facilitators of aid, but active agents, whose roles are shaped by power dynamics, historical legacies and institutional interests (Carpi, 2023).

While localisation rhetoric promotes inclusivity, funding mechanisms and accountability structures often favour large international NGOs, excluding smaller FBOs from formal funding often due to donor risk aversion (Barbelet et al., 2021). In practice, studies show that religious actors in humanitarian action navigate complex humanitarian principles. For instance, Lebanese evangelical churches providing food aid to Syrian refugees strived to uphold principles such as impartiality, even when operating from a religious framework (Kraft, 2016). Scholars argue for renewed dialogue between secular and faith-based humanitarian actors on how religious values and humanitarian principles can be complementary rather than contradictory (Kraft, 2016; Carpi, 2023; Rowland and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2023; Wilkinson, 2018; Salek, 2016). They consider faith

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leaders as legitimate humanitarian actors with their own frameworks of care and justice. In terms of VAW, while some local leaders may advise survivors to endure suffering for the sake of family unity, others advocate for gender equality and reciprocal rights within marriage (Pertek et al., 2023).

Interestingly, recent funding cuts signal a shift in humanitarian financing, prompting renewed engagement with the religious resources such as of Muslim communities—particularly obligatory and voluntary forms of charity, such as *zakat* and *sadaqa* respectively. This trend has catalysed new partnerships between UN, Muslim charities and multilateral financial institutions to deploy Islamic philanthropic instruments to assist displaced populations. Among the earliest initiatives is UNHCR's Zakat Refugee Fund, established in 2018, which has secured over US$263 million and supported nearly nine million people between 2017 and 2024 (UNHCR, 2025). Similarly, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) partnered with UNHCR to establish the Global Islamic Fund for Refugees (GIFR) in 2022, leveraging endowment funds (Pericoli, 2025). At the operational level, Muslim Charity in the UK collaborates with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on anti-trafficking programmes. These developments underscore the growing institutionalisation of Islamic philanthropy within the global humanitarian sector and early steps to integrate these into protection initiatives.

Towards intersectional and socioecological analysis

This chapter has explored the conceptual framework guiding this book, laying out the foundations for understanding and engaging with the nature of religion in experiences of VAW. It advances theory by integrating intersectionality and the socioecological model with a faith-sensitive lens. This methodological contribution drives key theoretical contributions and enhances the understanding of VAW—reconceptualising it to the continuum of violence, identifying the two sides of religion, as a source and resource, including a heuristic list of religious resources. While lived religion can reinforce patriarchal norms, it can also serve as a source of resilience, solidarity and resistance. An intersectional and sociological lens helps understand this duality shaping women's experiences in the social systems. By including religion as an integral element of lived experience, the framework opens up space to address the epistemic exclusions that persist in feminist theory and humanitarian practice and taps into moral and financial resources to meet dire humanitarian needs. By bridging intersectional vulnerability and resilience, the integrated model challenges reductive depictions of displaced populations as vulnerable victims and widens the lens from religion as a place of oppression to religion as a relational space for meaning-making, resistance and healing.

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The integrated framework also offers some practical contributions to help resource multi-stakeholder and cross-sector VAW initiatives. It guides experts, policymakers and practitioners to make more informed decisions about the place of religion in VAW and working across sectors and levels with faith communities to strengthen protection. Arguably, while religion may be seen as sourcing vulnerability, it has much more potential to resource protection (Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). This framework avoids treating religion as all good or all bad, instead of essentialising religion, it encourages a more balanced engagement. Failure to engage religion can compound vulnerability by leaving religion-related risks unmitigated.

This chapter foregrounds empirical chapters in Part II of this book centred on: women's experiences of violence (Chapter 3), vulnerability (Chapter 4), resilience (Chapter 5) and in Part III, religious engagement in humanitarianism (Chapter 6) and building an intersectional socioecology of protection (Chapter 7). An integrated intersectional and socioecological model offers a novel way to conceptualise religious influences in the continuum of violence in displacement—on both lived experiences and humanitarian interventions—as central forces in the study of vulnerability and resilience. The synthesis of literature calls for further exploration into the ways in which religion shapes displaced women's vulnerability and resilience. It also calls for discussion of how the humanitarian sector at times engages and disengages with religion in addressing VAW. The following chapters delve into the lived experiences of women and the perspectives of practitioners, illustrating how these dynamics unfold in practice. These include discussion of violence, sexual abuse and other forms of harm experienced during displacement that some readers may find distressing and so they are encouraged to engage with care. I begin with revisiting the concept of a violence continuum to lay out a basis to locate religion in the experiences of violence against displaced women.

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PART 2

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE ACROSS DISPLACEMENT

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3

Reframing violence against women

The spiral continuum

'*We came by smugglers. We spent one month on the way. It was freezing. We went through the mountains, and the Turkish border guards would sometimes fire bullets . . .*' (Hamida, in her 40s, originally from Syria, then in Ankara, Turkey)

Introduction

This chapter reframes the established 'continuum of violence' by introducing a 'spiral continuum' to help understand the complexity of displaced women's experiences. Advancing VAW theory and debates in protection, it argues that the spiral continuum more adequately reflects survivors' lived, nonlinear experiences than linear models. Intersecting forms of violence reoccur, overlap and reinforce one another with a cyclical escalation. I draw on the accounts of thirty-eight displaced Levantine and African women, interviewed in Türkiye (Ankara) and Tunisia (Medenine and Zarzis) in 2019. Some readers may find some narratives distressing and so they are advised to proceed with self-care.

The interviews were designed to give women space to share, in their own words, their experiences pre-displacement and what they endured during conflict, in their journeys and in places of refuge. In a safe and confidential setting, participants were invited to reflect on any abusive experiences they faced—whether from strangers, including people in positions of authority such as border control or police, or from individuals they knew personally. They were encouraged to share all incidents, including those they might not have considered serious at the time. I approached these interviews with humility, knowing that by listening and amplifying these voices, we can work towards safer futures.

I spoke with women from diverse demographic backgrounds, varying in age, education, marital status, ethnicity, socioeconomic position, religion and migration status (see Appendix 2). Many were marginalised within their host communities. Among Muslim participants, most self-identified as Sunni, while Christian respondents specified affiliations such as Catholic, Protestant, Presbyterian, Baptist, Assembly of God and Church of Christ. Participants were recruited through

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non-probabilistic methods, including purposive and convenience sampling, followed by snowball sampling, where respondents referred others who might be interested. In Türkiye, twenty-three women participated—twenty-one from Syria and two from Iraq. In Tunisia, fifteen women were interviewed: five originating from Nigeria, three from Congo, two from Ivory Coast and one each from Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Eritrea and South Sudan.

All women in Türkiye had fled conflict in Syria or Iraq; most held temporary protection status, except two Iraqis without legal status. In Tunisia, most were asylum seekers, rejected applicants or undocumented migrants, with three holding refugee status. Although data were collected in different locations to capture varied journeys and contexts, the studies in Türkiye and Tunisia are non-comparative as participants shared unique experiences in different geographical locations. Women's stories reflected distinct migratory pathways and durations of residence at the junction of Middle Eastern and African routes.

Considering the limitations of 'gender-based violence' and 'violence against women' definitions (see Chapter 1 in this volume), this chapter deploys the continuum of violence (see Chapter 2 in this volume) as a heuristic tool to theorise VAW in displacement. The concept of the continuum of violence helps to capture the continued nature, the plethora and breadth of violence in forced migration which goes beyond the narrow definitions and demarcations of violence. However, here the focus extends to the spiral continuum of VAW which helps to minimise risks of silencing and homogenising displaced survivors when classifying violence into rigid categories and timeline, highlighting the unexpected turns of violence and reinforcing interdependencies between different harms. In doing so, the chapter concurrently operationalises and expands the conceptualisation of the violence continuum by accounting for VAW as the integral element of that continuum across a lifetime. Also, the term 'intersectional violence' is used to refer to the intersecting and multiple forms of identity-based violence (e.g. based on gender, race, religion and migrant status) to capture the spatial and temporal complexity of violence against displaced women.

The spiral model (Figure 3.1) helps illustrate that the continuum of violence is not linear: VAW originates from pre-displacement times, runs through conflict, flight, transit, refuge and continues across women's experiences with reinforcing and accumulative effects. The spiral model builds on the concept of the continuum of violence across different stages of displacement, from conflict, transit to refuge to capture a more complex picture of the continued and multidimensional nature of VAW. The incremental nature of the spiral of VAW, as demonstrated below, reflects similar widening patterns of the continuum of violence in migration contexts (Nagai et al., 2008; Krause, 2015; Canning, 2017; Pertek and Phillimore, 2022). This diachronic view reveals how violence evolves, intensifies and accumulates, recognising temporal intersections—how past trauma interacts with present vulnerabilities to shape future risks.

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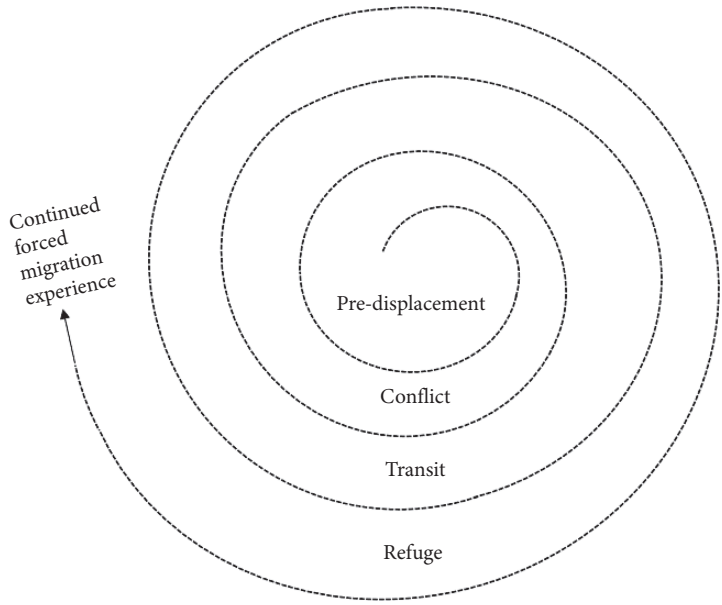


Figure 3.1 The spiral VAW model in displacement (Author's own elaboration)

This chapter also argues that VAW increases along the stages of migration due to accumulation of systemic factors, such as state and structural violence. Stories of women, particularly those from Syria in Türkiye, showed that the length of settlement was associated with higher accumulated vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse as risks, such as lack of access to public funds. Similarly, stories of African women in Tunisia illustrate the incremental pattern of violence in their migration journeys. Empirical evidence from both research sites also highlights that escaping the spiral of violence becomes more difficult as survivors continue to experience structural, direct and cultural violence beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries and with accumulative trauma. In brief, reflecting on the survivors' accounts, the more prolonged exposure to VAW and displacement with reliance on external assistance amid systemic protection gaps, the more complex experiences can become.

Experiences of violence: A spiral continuum

Extensive scholarly evidence demonstrates displaced populations experience high levels of structural, symbolic and interpersonal violence across the forced migration experience (Friedman, 1992; Ferris, 2007; Freedman, 2016; Canning, 2017). Multiple acts of violence affect both women and men refugees of various

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backgrounds (WRC, 2020), although women are disproportionally affected by interpersonal violence, pre-, during and after conflict and migratory processes, including by spousal, family and community violence (Ferris, 2007; Canning, 2017). Studies report varying levels of victimisation by partners and non-partners at different stages of migration (e.g. Belanteri et al., 2020; Sipsma et al., 2015). Juxtaposing data from studies in humanitarian and immigrant settings indicates that the exposure to violence increases in migration routes (ibid, Pertek and Phillimore, 2022). For instance, around one in five women were subjected to sexual violence in complex emergencies (Vu et al., 2014) and over half of migrant survivors treated by a clinic on Lesvos Island experienced sexual violence in transit, 35% pre-migration and 5% on the Island (Belanteri et al., 2020).

Displaced women's accounts presented in this chapter indicate that violence spiralled across the continuum along different stages of forced migration routes and in refuge. Regardless of their background, all interviewees talked about experiencing different and multiple forms of violence and discrimination across their lifespan, including pre-migration from childhood to adulthood, and in conflict, transit and refuge—as part of their social continuum (Kelly, 1988). Women described overlapping VAW experiences with an intersectional, temporospatial and often cyclical pattern of violence where they experienced repeated sequences of violence sporadically and with time lapses. Despite their transitory social environments in the forced migration experience, violence continued at different locations, both recently and decades prior. As shown in Table 3.1, nearly half of the respondents disclosed at least five incidents of violence and discrimination experienced, including three women disclosing seven events, seven respondents six and eight women five incidents. One-third disclosed at least four events, five women at least three and two women at least two throughout their lifetime, indicating that violence was a common reality in their lives rather than a one-off occurrence.

Table 3.1 Number of incidents of violence mentioned by respondents

No of incidents disclosed*	All respondents	Levantine respondents	Sub-Saharan respondents
7	3	2	1
6	7	5	2
5	8	2	6
4	13	9	4
3	5	4	1
2	2	1	1
Total	**38**	**23**	**15**

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The experiences shared by women I interviewed in Türkiye and Tunisia revealed protracted, multiple and complex exposure to different forms of violence. These included sexual violence, such as rape in conflict or detention, sex trafficking, forced prostitution and intimate partner violence, as well as reproductive violence, including enforced birth giving, lack of access to maternal health care in detention and trafficking situations. Those reporting physical violence spoke about beating, torture, honour killings and restrictions on movement. Incidents of psychological violence through xenophobia, racism and domestic abuse, while emotional violence involved gaslighting, blackmail and threats to take children away. Verbal violence manifested through threats, racism, name-calling, belittling and humiliation. Spiritual violence related to using spiritual means to control, harass or demean them. Finally, economic violence included deprivation of resources, financial control and enforced dependency on abusers. Women's accounts of continued violence in their lives form a spiral continuum which is important to conceptualise as non-linear as stages of migration evolve with unexpected turns, sometimes blockages and slowing down.

Most participants settled in Türkiye shared life-long accounts of continued family violence (physical, emotional, economic, spiritual), including pre-displacement. Migrants temporarily residing, and some recently arriving, in Tunisia talked about their recent traumas endured during transit, especially in Libya. For ethical reasons and to avoid generating distress among respondents, I did not ask African migrant women to specifically recall other potentially traumatic VAW experiences pre-displacement beyond the experiences that they voluntarily shared. Thus, it cannot be assumed that any woman did not have other VAW experiences or that there were necessarily differences between the two groups.

The findings illustrate that the volume and complexity of VAW were increasing along the stages of migration as multiple factors accumulated (see Chapter 4 this volume). The incremental and intersecting VAW experiences were multiple, overlapping and continued forming a rather endless spiral across a continuum of violence at inter-personal, community and societal (structural) levels. In explaining the nature of violence described by respondents, I use an analogy of a 'spiral' showing a continuous and gradually widening increase around a central point, which feminist standpoint discerns to be gender inequalities (Heise, 1998).

The nature of the spiral continuum of violence is illustrated by Khadija's story who experienced accumulative violent incidents along her displacement experience. First, she was recruited by other women at her workplace in Syria for marriage with a Turkish man in Türkiye, the process which she described as disguised human trafficking:

> '*. . . The gang consisted of women . . . I was a widow for 8 years, but these women came to my family and tried to convince them to send me to Türkiye to get married*

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. . . After I came here, I realized that this was merely trading, and they took money for each person they sent . . .' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

But Khadija's story did not end there, it developed in a non-linear pattern of reoccurring migration. After leaving the arranged Turkish marriage and returning to Syria, she had faced backlash from her fathers and brothers at home for living with another man and so she returned to Türkiye via a perilous route. Due to the lack of legal permit to re-enter the country, she decided to cross borders through irregular routes, taking additional risks of state violence and pushbacks at the borders. Ultimately, she was smuggled, undertaking a long journey lasting several weeks, crossing borders while being subjected to continued abuse by smugglers, people in authority and other refugees, as she narrated below:

'*While we were coming to Türkiye, the Syrian smugglers were working with the Turkish ones and we were sexually harassed, and we were kidnapped for one day in an apartment . . .*' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Due to restrictive migration governance, protection gaps for irregular migrants and restricted access to public support, Khadija was forced into marriage to avoid further spiralling risks of VAW in transit and refuge.

'*. . . I didn't want to get married again but Salin* [trafficker's name] *told me that . . . I might get raped or killed by mafia and that I cannot stay here alone . . .*' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

After a second divorce, her vulnerability to exploitation further heightened due to isolation and lack of community support. She was subjected to harassment by strangers:

'*. . . Two of my ex's relatives, two guys started sexually harassing me after I got divorced . . . Also, my employer's nephew tried to invite me to his car and verbally abused me . . .*

. . . I stayed with Syrians . . . they tried to introduce me to prostitution . . .' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Khadija's accounts above (and continued in Chapter 4) illustrate a case of a spiral and non-linear violence continuum which manifested differently for different women. The concept of the continuum of violence helps map the heightened risks of violence across different stages of forced migration with a series of overlapping violent incidents, while the spiral nature underscores the unexpected turns, multiple and repeated forms of violence. Her story and stories of other women, discussed in this chapter, further inform the concept of the continuum of violence,

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demonstrating how risks and exposures to violence amplify vulnerability to subsequent harm, as violence accumulates and reproduces itself over time (Galtung, 1990). Indeed, violence sparks other violent acts as a stimulus for more violence to occur. For example, as in Khadija's case, war violence exacerbated gender inequalities which triggered migration-related vulnerabilities, including to trafficking, sexual harassment, forced marriage and social exclusion and deprivation.

The rest of the chapter moves through violence experiences at different stages of forced migration commonly identified in women's stories—from violence often beginning before migration, and intensifying in conflict, flight and transit and further exacerbating in refuge. All these experiences across different stages form a spiral continuum of violence as they reinforce each other and shape spiralling effects across displacement experiences, often compounding trauma and stressors.

Widespread violence pre-migration

The most frequent experiences of VAW raised by participants pre-migration were spousal violence at origin (around a third of all women and half of those who had ever been married), wider family violence (around a fourth of women) and early and forced marriage (almost half of respondents).[1] FGM/C was disclosed by one respondent. Women who talked about family violence in childhood and adolescence mentioned prolonged restrictions on their mobility and social isolation, economic deprivation, child neglect, severe psychological and emotional abuse, physical abuse, spiritual violence and, for some, denial of healthcare to treat serious illness. Many Levantine respondents described family violence perpetrated by close relatives and extended female and male family members, mainly in impoverished settings with some of them describing early parental loss. For example, women recalled harsh treatment and physical and emotional violence from a mother-in-law and a stepmother who belittled and exercised power over them in the domestic sphere. Several women shared accounts of prolonged and overlapping violence in their lives, from child neglect, family violence to spousal violence after marriage. Faridah, who lost her father as a child, was one such survivor:

> '*My brother put us under control; we cannot go out, nobody can come to see us . . . My husband was also nervous, but I listened to everything he said; he says do this, and I do it, and he beats me, and I endure it.*' (Faridah from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Women who recalled compounded and complex family and spousal violence suffered simultaneously from different measures of violence and degree of control

[1] Six women married before fifteen and eleven women between fifteen and eighteen. Respondents who married early (before eighteen) constituted more than half of women in a declared partnership (seventeen persons, 53% of ever-married women and 34% of all responding women).

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at home throughout their life. Several women spoke about the escalation of domestic violence following advice given to their husbands by their husbands' and their own family members, indicating violence was normalised and socially accepted. Some survivors of spousal abuse described how their closest family members and religious leaders would encourage them to endure their predicament with patience, which often was connotated with a religious virtue. For example, some survivors, who sought support from a religious leader, were advised towards patience and prayer, which indirectly caused harm:

> '*When I'd tell him* [religious leader] *that I am feeling distressed, he'd always tell me to pray and make Duaa* [prayer] . . .' (Lotifa from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

In the most severe and quite rare cases, advice of patience, combined with family pressure and lack of support, led to the suicide of victims, as recalled by several women who heard of such cases in their families or communities.

A minority of women described how their husbands invoked interpretations of religious texts to justify abusive behaviour, which may be considered a form of spiritual violence. While there is no singular definition of spiritual violence, it can be understood as a misuse of spiritual means to control, harass, demean and exploit an individual. In some narratives, this form of abuse manifested in both private and public spheres, as in the case of Roqaya:

> '*My husband says it is permissible to beat me . . . I ask, "does your religion permit you to do this?" and he says yes and that Allah made it obligatory for women to obey their husbands, but they forget that Allah ordered husbands to be good men and treat their women fairly.*' (Roqaya from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

In addition, Roqaya encountered spiritual abuse when seeking material assistance at a local mosque, where a local imam made inappropriate demands for physical affection in exchange for support. Such expectations reflect a deliberate intent to exploit and abuse power within a place of worship.

African respondents often suffered economic violence due to poverty at home and denial of education underpinned by gender inequality. Raised in poverty, they were relegated to unpaid domestic, caring and agricultural work at the cost of their education:

> '. . . *there is not enough money to take care of all of us in school. So that's why . . . we went to farm, while our brother went to school.*' (Aretta from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

In many societies, the social expectations towards gender roles of boys and girls vary and are valued unequally. Girls are often expected to fulfil reproductive roles,

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such as to contribute to domestic chores and childcare, while boys are expected to gain education to be able to make a living. In turn, women's illiteracy, poverty and limited participation in public life compounded vulnerability to VAW.

Intensified violence in conflict

Conflict intensifies the severity and prevalence of VAW (UN and WB, 2018). Pre-war conditions, such as acceptance of violence and gender inequalities, underpin those conditions that breed VAW and are exacerbated in conflict. As discussed in Chapter 2, feminist literature widely reports sexual violence as a gendered tactic of war and recognises rape as a 'weapon of war' (Ferris, 2007). According to 'an essentialist approach' to sexual violence in war defined by Skjelsbaek (2001), patriarchal and hierarchical gender norms intensify during conflict and lead to the heightened expressions of sexual violence against all women. But sexual violence in conflict can also be opportunistic beyond strategic rape during times of impunity (Swaine et al., 2018).

Almost all respondents experienced conflict-related violence either in their country of origin or in conflict-affected countries of transit, such as in Libya. Many continued to experience the impacts of conflict violence long-term, such as trauma and raising children born of sexual violence by themselves. In total, sixteen women were subjected to sexual violence in conflict-torn transit countries such as Libya, while all respondents from Syria and Iraq were exposed to war violence. The Levantine respondents reported being terrorised and exposed to life-threatening conflict-related violence, many witnessing war atrocities. Most lived in extreme fear for years amid the horrors of geopolitical conflict, losing family members, witnessing deaths in airstrikes and massacres, including decapitations and exposure to human remains of male and female victims:

> '. . . *The boy was so young, he was 14, they brought the sword and cut his neck, and left his body hung for 3 days, and everyday his mother would come and wash his hands and legs and talk to him. I witnessed so many killings . . .*' (Lamia from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Drawing on the structuralist approach to violence (Skjelsbaek, 2001), certain groups of women were at higher risk of CRSV than others. Syrian women feared forced marriage, especially for their adolescent girls who faced heightened vulnerability attracting the attention of militia groups in displacement and at the borders. Some were fearful of their daughters being kidnapped by the wives of Daesh combatants and being forced into marriage, and in turn ceased sending their daughters to school in occupied areas.

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> '*. . . Daesh wives would go to schools and pick the most beautiful girl, 15 years old, in the class and go to the girl's family house, and ask them to marry her . . .* [*Once*] *Daesh asked them to marry their daughter and the father refused, and they came and took the girl without her father's consent, and gave him a small bag full of dollars, and told the father that he should forget his daughter and never ask about her again . . . After that accident, all the families in that area stopped sending their girls to school.*' (Monira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

The indications of early and forced marriage above reveal prevailing beliefs and practices regarding the minimum marriage age, which were likely underpinned by interpretations that enabled Daesh combatants to marry under-aged girls. This highlights a significant risk of spiritual violence and demonstrates how religious beliefs can be (mis)used to inflict harm through practices such as early and forced marriage.

Several Syrian and Iraqi women also spoke about an increase in domestic violence during war times. Roqaya, aged thirty and from Syria (whose story continues in Chapter 4 and 5), was one of the survivors who experienced protracted domestic violence from the early weeks of her marriage, which intensified in conflict.

> '*I got married five years ago. The violence and physical abuse began since I got married, on my third day. My husband was a soldier and he was very close-minded . . . We got separated three months after we got married. I was pregnant at the time and I moved in with my family. For the following two years I was trying to get a divorce. I did not feel safe. My husband set my family's house on fire while we were inside, and he attacked my father with a knife . . .*' (Roqaya from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

In Roqaya's case, spousal violence started early in her marriage, but intensified in conflict and further in refuge, as shown later in this chapter. Some women subjected to spousal violence talked about continued abuse in war, but in their narratives did not link it with war outcomes. Rather, they seem to have experienced it as a continuum of violence without clear temporal boundaries, indicating that CRSV and interpersonal violence pre-conflict and post-conflict are related (Swaine et al., 2018).

In terms of CRSV, stigma, fear of retribution from perpetrators and lack of support structures may discourage survivors to disclose abuses. To protect themselves, women may choose to not talk about their experiences. But silence about such crimes may also express women's agency and be part of women's everyday lives and coping (George and Kent, 2014). In this study, only a few women mentioned incidents of rape in conflict, for example, in detention in Iraq and Syria by militia groups. For example, an Iraqi woman recalled:

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> '*The jails are full of women, some of them are pregnant . . . A relative, that was in jail and got out, said that they heard women giving birth on the floor and that they were hearing their screams . . .*' (Saira from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

African respondents also recalled incidents of sexual violence in home countries affected by war and conflict-torn countries of transit and temporary refuge, such as Libya. In home countries, for example Sudan, women were raped as part of ethnical cleansing tactics. Sexual violence prompted them to flee:

> '*Violence is a result of the war in my country because the government in Sudan collect people together and kill them, and the women are not valued there; they always face violence . . . In Sudan, when we were in the camps, there was ethnical cleansing, and they were raping women, and that's why I left Sudan.*' (Hafsa from South Sudan, 30s, Medenine)

Sexual violence was widely reported in other settings as a pre-planned war tactic. For instance, in the recent three decades in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and East Timor, women of specific ethnic groups were subjected to rape as an instrument of genocide and ethnic cleansing through the killing of men and impregnation of women (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001; Skjelsbæk, 2001:220). Sexual violence was targeted at women with a certain 'ethnoreligious identity' because they represented national cultural symbols (Carpenter, 2009). Evidence shows ethnic and religiously motivated cleansing strategies in armed conflict contexts target women for sexual torture—such as systematic rape—to shame men of their communities. For example, in former Yugoslavia women were raped and impregnated by enemies to undermine the morale of Muslim fighters (Salzman, 1998).

In this research, almost all interviewees in Türkiye reported witnessing bombardment and war-related atrocities at home, prompting their displacement. Subsequently, they were subjected to a spiral of harms along the journey and in places of temporary refuge. Among African respondents, many experienced sexual violence in war-torn Libya, spiralling during transit and their journeys, as discussed next.

Intensified violence in migratory journey

Each forced migrant journey is distinct, but journeys are invariably undertaken in search of sanctuary. The common phases can occur in non-linear patterns and include conflict, exile, transit, arrival to and residency in temporary destinations and refuge countries (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). But the mobility of migrants can often be hindered, and journeys can be slowed down

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and blocked (Schapendonk and Steel, 2014). Many migrants wait for permissions and/or conducive conditions to resume their journeys and covertly move across borders facing numerous risks, including violence in transit and refuge countries. For many, arrival to countries of destination does not end their journeys, therefore, it is important to consider forced migrant journeys beyond time and space across all past and continued stages of migration.

Mobility of women is often limited by state systems that limit movement of people in general creating restrictive conditions, imposing gendered immobility and heightened exposure to different types of violence. Migration governance is often focused on laws, policies and institutions and bureaucratic practices focused on security and deterrence which may inflict state violence at the hands of state actors such as authorities, border control, officials, even if violence is not directly intended. State violence is rooted in coloniality, with migration restrictions extending imperial projects of control over mobility, producing racialised borders (Achiume, 2019). Such violence is normalised through border pushbacks and deaths at borders. Framed as the *necropolitics*, it determines who may move and live and who must wait or die (Mbembe, 2003).

Most respondents in the two contexts described life-threatening migratory pathways—the complex, dangerous and unofficial routes—in which single, divorced and widowed women faced VAW by border control officers, traffickers, smugglers, militia, authorities and other actors. Undignified and risky forced migrant journeys were categorised by some interviewees as a form of VAW. Many travelled without personal belongings, food and water across the sea, rivers, land, desert and mountains, some carrying or losing their children and peers in extreme weather conditions, facing armed attacks, detention, waiting at the borders. In such conditions 'violence of abandonment' manifested as the intentional lack of state action to support migrants abandoned in the deserts, seas, camps and at the borders (Davies et al., 2017).

The Levantine respondents travelled via the Middle East migratory routes while Sub-Saharans travelled through Western and Eastern African surreptitious and hazardous multi-country migratory routes in convoys into Libya and then Tunisia. Most of them survived drowning and rescue operations in the sea, but therein witnessed the death of other migrants. A minority fled Libya by walking to Tunisia. Many people died because of physical exhaustion and armed attacks, sexual exploitation in detention and sex trafficking. The Levantine respondents were faced with shootings and imprisonment by border control officers, making several attempts to enter Türkiye with their families, some waiting for months at the borders. Almost all respondents described witnessing death of compatriots and other migrants:

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'*We had two deaths in our convoy for lack of water. It was June . . . a lot of sun . . . We were shipped in chests with cows. Me, my son and my cousin were in a trunk so that people cannot see us.*' (Christelle from Ivory Coast, 20s, Zarzis)

'*They started shooting in our presence . . . we would do anything. People died . . . Inside the desert, there are people dying after drinking dirty water . . .*' (Grace from Ghana, 20s, Medenine)

'*From Homs to Türkiye we went through 40 checkpoints, and we had to hide our money and everything . . . our biggest fear was getting arrested.*' (Zaafira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Women also faced multiple risks during smuggling. Kameela, a Syrian widow and mother of five, lost her husband, brother and father in war and a new-born baby when she made multiple attempts to enter Türkiye during the winter. She was one of the women approached by smugglers who described the refugee journey as violence itself:

'*Violence against women is what we witnessed here, not in Syria. There was no violence before the conflict, but I consider what happened on our way to Türkiye as violence.*' (Kameela from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Similar to other respondents travelling with children, Kameela also experienced temporary separation from some of her children by border controls when crossing borders.[2] Sophia from the DRC was forced to engage in transactional sex for travel passes in transit across Africa with militia and smugglers, and into prostitution in Libya. She was one among the dozen of African respondents who experienced sexual violence in transit, including rape in detention. She also considered her journey itself as a form of violence:

'*When I was leaving Libya, in the house where we were waiting to be taken to Europe, with the man who I was collaborating with . . . they then moved us to another house. Women—on another side and in another house; men—on the other side . . . And from this moment, they started raping us. It was no longer about the trip. We didn't see the man* [smuggler] *anymore . . .*' (Sophia from DRC, 20s, Zarzis)

Some African respondents fleeing conflict, e.g. from South Sudan, Ivory Coast and the DRC, talked about risks of sexual violence by militia during transit. Hafsa's account indicates both women and men were vulnerable to GBV in conflict, with men more vulnerable to torture and witnessing sexual violence against their women:

[2] Among the African migrants, only one family out of four remained together throughout the entire journey from South Sudan to Tunisia.

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> '*Another danger during traveling is when leaving Sudan to Libya; you might encounter militias on the way, and it's a problem especially for women; they treat women violently, they beat them, and they rape them . . . Those who are traveling alone, but even if she's traveling with men, it wouldn't matter, because the militias have weapons and they torture men and take their women . . .*' (Halima from South Sudan, 30s, Medenine)

Rape is used strategically to shame, dehumanise and stigmatise victims (Davies and True, 2015). In addition, half of African women were trafficked and enslaved—a handful, like Sophia (above), were forced into prostitution involving food deprivation and pregnancy from rape. Six trafficked women and three other women were kidnapped by smugglers of various nationalities. Orisa was one of the trafficked women deceived at the place of origin, terrorised with weapons, sold and subjected to extreme exploitation in Libya:

> '*If I don't allow men to sleep with me, they will beat me . . . There are plenty of girls, they would lock us in a room and many men would come and sleep with us, they would collect the money*' (Orisa from Nigeria, 30s, Zarzis)

Orisa described her entrapment as a form of slavery. Even after becoming pregnant, her traffickers forced her to undergo an induced premature labour so she could quickly return to forced prostitution. Other women who became pregnant in Libya told of being denied access to medical assistance, giving birth alone in prisons or private houses, and some mentioned the loss of a child.

Some forced migrant women were also subjected to interpersonal violence by other migrants. Kissa, who escaped detention, was among two women who described interpersonal violence from other migrants, who acted as protectors and initially offered them support, but later sexually abused and abandoned them. She fled DRC due to political persecution and was detained upon reaching Libya, as an illegal migrant. Having nowhere to go after escape from detention, she joined a farm as an unpaid labourer. During wood collection, she managed to exit the farm with the help of a passing migrant man offering her protection. With affection, she moved into his accommodation. After falling pregnant, she was abandoned on the streets and walked to find refuge in Tunisia. She considered her experience as sexual abuse:

> '*I experienced sexual abuse. When I became pregnant and the man said, no, it is not mine . . . I believed that he would protect me but he just left me on the streets (in Libya)*' (Kissa from DRC, 30s, Medenine)

These accounts are just some of the women's experiences of direct, interpersonal and structural violence which spiralled across settings. Upon arrival to countries

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of refuge, these women were subjected to other forms of violence, reinforced by earlier exposures in the spiral continuum of VAW, as discussed next.

Accumulative violence in refuge

Many women, having experienced some harm in conflict and migration journeys upon arrival to, and in settlements in, places of refuge, were exposed to additional incidents of violence as part of wider state and structural violence. Many respondents spoke about racial and ethnic discrimination in their interactions with settled and migrant communities, and its deleterious effect on their wellbeing (explored in the next section). In Galtung's (1969, 1990) classification, racism is a form of cultural violence underpinned by prejudice which he calls in other words 'massive cultural violence'. Local host communities were said to be divided, some supporting forced migrants with generosity and material assistance, while others discriminated against them because of their race, ethnicity and religion, assuming that they will reduce already scarce public resources, for example, work, places in hospitals and schools.

While a minority spoke about increased domestic violence in places of refuge, discussed in Chapter 4, most Levantine respondents in Türkiye reported violence against them by non-partners and the wider community, motivated by their stigmatised, Syrian nationality. Some considered that they were targeted because of their perceived refugee vulnerability, for instance in kidnapping attempts. Some refugees said they were accused of taking state benefits. Several respondents felt unwelcome and observed racist and anti-immigrant sentiments against them and their children in public spaces:

> '*The thing that I found most difficult here is when I walk in the street, I feel unwelcomed. People around me look at me and some even say to my face*, "*Go back to your country!*"' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Similarly in Tunisia, most African participants felt discriminated against, even at migrant shelters where some staff questioned their reasons for migrating. Most reported racial discrimination as they were visibly different in public places, for example in public buses:

> '*Some women, when they saw you, they would cover their nose thinking that you were smelling.*' (Ayesha from Sierra Leone, 30s, Medenine)

Women were also subjected to structural violence embedded within social structures of the countries of refuge, as they experienced injustices in social, legal and political systems, especially when rules or policies systematically discriminated

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against migrants. Structural violence maintains inequalities within and between social groups in society, but also occurs when institutions fail to respond to and deprioritise forced migrant women's needs, disrespect and mistreat them, and uphold and reproduce discriminatory sexist, patriarchal and misogynistic norms (Marsh, 2006).

In this study, state violence in countries of refuge manifested through diverse forms of structural violence such as slow violence and violence of uncertainty. 'Slow violence' refers to the violence of everyday harms of destitution, depriving and neglecting migrant needs (Mayblin, 2019). 'Violence of uncertainty' involves the overarching harms of systematic insecurities affecting migrants, such as rigid family reunification policies (Grace et al., 2018). Structural violence clearly undermined displaced women's survival abilities and fundamental rights to live as equals. For example, in Türkiye, through tentative settlement and deportation policies, women feared their residence permits would be revoked and felt threatened by sudden deportation. Many were unable to reunite with their families for legal reasons. Many women, whom I met in Ankara, lived in inadequate housing conditions (e.g. ruined accommodations, basements, abandoned settlements) and with food insecurity. For example, several families I visited had no food to put on the table to break their fast during Ramadan. Similarly, women in Tunisia feared for their legal status speculating that future hostile migration policies would criminalise their stay. Such uncertainty added additional stressors in victims' lives, undermining healing, introducing further harms and compounding existing traumas.

Most respondents were entrenched in 'slow violence' with gendered harms: hunger, lack of clothing and hygiene items, economic exclusion, isolation and lack of support from the state. Women talked about inadequate living conditions, poor housing, food insecurity, lack of work and destitution in refuge:

> '*There are special needs for girls like clothes and hygiene products that migrant shelters should give us. They give us the food vouchers, 30 Dinars* [c. $10], *and it's so little . . . For the hygiene and necessary items, we change clothes between ourselves.*' (Zola from Eritrea, 20s, Medenine)

> '*They are not giving us food, nor treatment. Today this toddler was very sick, her body was hot . . . she was scratching, I told them* [shelter staff] *but they didn't answer me . . . I got pregnant here . . . but I have no pampers, no milk, no clothes, no blanket . . . They say we should leave the camp, last time, they said we had 3 days. They should consider this baby, because I have nowhere to go . . . I don't know anybody.*' (Kanika from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

Those without any support in deplorable housing conditions and shelters felt forgotten and abandoned by mainstream migration organisations and authorities. Those with irregular migrant status were especially deprived of their basic needs

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and rights, unable to access public support and this increased their dependency on informal aid and the kindness of others. They had limited room to manoeuvre for survival without the right to work and education, especially those without temporary protection or refugee status, such as Iraqi women in Türkiye:

> '*When we arrived, we were sleeping on our bags . . . We need money to sustain ourselves, we need a washing machine, and we don't have a fridge . . . I hope that my children go to school, I can't read nor write, and I don't wish for them to be the same, but their future has ended . . .*' (Ferhana from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

The COVID-19 crisis has intensified deprivation of migrants and experience of slow violence in these contexts (Pertek et al., 2020). With the suspension of informal aid initiatives and loss of informal jobs, many migrants struggled with access to food and hygiene in both countries. While ignoring their basic human needs, such as nutrition and medical care, the presence of structural violence has the potential to cause death indirectly through an extended causal chain which can enable starvation, illnesses and other miseries (Galtung, 1990).

In addition, structural violence against displaced women in Türkiye and Tunisia exacerbated the risks of domestic violence among forced migrant women. Most Levantine respondents (nineteen women) who lived without a male partner reported the experience of, and a continued exposure to, sexual harassment and transactional sex in the informal aid sector, public spaces and local councils (further discussed in Chapter 4). Some spoke of their continued gendered vulnerability to exploitation and kidnapping by street gangs and strangers who targeted vulnerable refugee women.

> '*One time, I almost got kidnapped . . . I went to visit my sister, and I was walking on the street with my sister's children, and a car came, and nobody was in the street, and he got off from the car and put the knife on my back, and told me, "Go to the car without any sound, if you make any, I will kill you here." I told him, "Why?" He told me, "We love Syrian women; they're beautiful." . . .*' (Lina from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Also, some displaced women in Türkiye talked about the risks of exploitative marriages, in which refugee women were promised a legal marriage with a Turkish citizen in exchange for residence, but instead could face abuse and economic violence.

Finally, sexual harassment of refugee women by local men was widely reported by all participants I interviewed in Türkiye. Informal helpers, who lent them material support from local host communities, continued to contact them and arrange groceries. But over time, offers of informal and individual support transformed into transactional sex offers in exchange for intimate relations.

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'*There is a woman who had five or six kids, and a man said he was going to help her. He told her that he was coming to her* [place]. *If her neighbour and her neighbour's son weren't there, he would've raped her.*' (Sanah from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

In seeking support, most Syrian and Iraqi women were persistently exposed to sexual harassment and transactional offers, especially single women, divorcees and widows were offered material assistance in exchange for intimate relations or marriage.

Compounded impacts of violence in displacement

Thus far, this chapter looked at displaced women's experiences of the spiral continuum of violence. But each woman experienced abuse differently, with long-term effects and cumulative experiences compounding their traumas. Canning (2017:iii) highlights: '*For survivors of gendered violence, harm inflicted throughout the process of seeking asylum can be intersectional and compound the impacts of previous experiences of violent continuums.*' To better understand what interviewees were going through, I now discuss the impacts of VAW on them. I argue that these effects, and the fact that they are not addressed across different migration settings, is violence in itself and therefore forms part of the continuum of violence discussed in this chapter.

Forced migration itself is often a traumatic experience. Trauma among refugees can be multi-layered with the chronological sequential phases of traumatisation (Keilson, 1992). Those who experience VAW often suffer from multiple and ongoing traumas as a result of structural inequalities and multiple exposures to VAW (Phillimore and Pertek et al., 2021). Indeed, harm done by sexual violence is more than a single trauma (Wasco, 2003). In the stories of women I interviewed, the impacts of specific forms of VAW compounded, including by the impacts of other types of violence. Women spoke about multiple, immediate and long-term impacts of VAW on their wellbeing. Some recalled the physical impacts of VAW, including developing chronic diseases. Not only did individual incidents of violence have a direct impact, for instance physical injuries, but the intersecting and multiple forms of violence against women affected women across different domains of wellbeing—psychological, spiritual, social and biological, to name a few.

Victimisation and lengthy waits for refugee status (structural violence) have taken their toll on survivors' health and ability to work. Zola, who was raped in Libyan detention centres and was separated from her family in Eritrea for many years due to her migrant journey halted in Tunisia, described her physical condition:

'*. . . I didn't have diabetes before, I got it after what has been happening here in Tunisia . . . because I keep talking all the time what should be done* [to help us] *and nothing is happening.*' (Zola from Eritrea, 20s, Medenine)

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Survivors also experienced a range of reproductive impacts, most commonly pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases from rape, some reporting chronic pain. For example, Ayesha, survivor of sexual trafficking, gave birth to twin boys from sexual violence:

> '*Some Libyans, they kidnapped me and kept me in their custody . . . I was forced to stay with them . . . That's how I got these babies. I was raped by different men, different colour of men, I was there from October 9th to November 26th. One of the guys, helped me to escape, by then they could see that I am pregnant, I was weak, vomiting, I was very sick . . .*' (Ayesha from Sierra Leone, 30s, Medenine)

Several survivors of sexual exploitation also spoke about fear of shame and stigma which they were confronting in their local communities and intensified their psychological trauma. For Ayesha, in this study, the experiences of sexual trafficking meant community backlash, curtailed marriage prospects and social exclusion, had her story become publicly known:

> '*Well, actually, in my community and the culture there . . . especially if it* [rape] *happened all over again, not by one person, it will be difficult for you to get married. They think that for somebody to get raped all over again by many men, it will be difficult to . . . stay just with one man . . . If you have a child but you are not legally married out of wedlock, they see you . . . as a prostitute. They also see the children* [born from exploitation] *as bad people . . .*' (Ayesha from Sierra Leone, 30s, Medenine)

As mentioned by Ayesha deep stigma against survivors spills over to their children born of sexual violence and can last across generations (Wagner et al., 2022). Other survivors recalled the difficulty of living without any socio-economic support with children born of rape. They experienced spiritual pain, with some survivors feeling spiritually disturbed and disconnected. Meanings attached to VAW experiences engender different levels of pain and humiliation among religious survivors (Kamau, 2016). For example, in communities where protecting one's 'purity' before marriage or keeping limited contact with the opposite sex are important social norms, experiencing VAW violates these norms and causes spiritual struggles and severe psychological pain.

Mental health impacts of VAW across migration included anxiety, depression and trauma. Evidence suggests around half of survivors of sexual violence, war and displacement suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Flatten et al. cited in Krause, 2015). Persistent traumatising memories of rape, war atrocities, kidnapping and other oppressions, as distal (remote and past) stressors, continued to affect women cognitively and behaviourally. In addition, respondents experienced distress associated with daily, proximal (ongoing and recent) migration-related, socio-economic stressors such as inadequate housing and lack of employment. For instance, the impacts of family violence in adolescence

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Table 3.2 Level of psychological distress in the Kessler scale

Level (score)	Levantine (n=23)	%	African(n=15)	%
'Severe' (score above 30)	12	52%	11	73%
'Moderate' (score 25–29)	5	22%	2	13%
'Mild' (score 20–24)	4	17%	1	7%
'Likely to be well' (score under 20)	2	9%	1	7%

(pre-war), were compounded by the effects of conflict related violence and risks of harassment and racism in refuge, subsequently affecting women's mental health and wellbeing in the long-term:

> '*Because my life was very difficult, it would always make me feel sad and upset, and I'd like to be like normal people, but these problems always stay in my mind and heart and make me feel sometimes angry, sometimes scared.*' (Shamila from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Violent incidents at various stages of displacement affected women in different ways, for example, border violence, detention and losing a child in transit affected mothers mentally, physically and spiritually. Most women lived in limbo, unable to continue their journeys or return home, thus daily stressors continued to negatively affect their wellbeing. The survey findings show the scale of impact of women's VAW and migration experiences on their mental health and affirm the qualitative insights provided in this section. Results of the Kessler psychological distress (PD) scale (Kessler et al., 2002), Table 3.2, found two thirds of women (n=23; Levantine=12, Sub-Saharan=11) scored 'severe' mental disorder, seven women scored 'moderate' and five women indicated having 'mild' mental conditions. Only three women indicated that they were 'likely to be well'. Although the average scale of psychological distress of all respondents (mean=32.82) were located on the Kessler scale as having 'severe' PD, the African and Christian respondents scored relatively higher in PD than the Levantine and Muslim respondents (Appendix 4). However, additional analysis (T-test results) showed no statistically significant difference in PD results between different social groups, indicating that processes of displacement in different locations severely affect displaced women's psychological distress levels.

Interview data and detailed results of the psychological distress scale (Appendix 4) show that most women reported feeling depressed but to varying degrees.[3] Respondents expressed a variety of feelings in their conditions, including anger,

[3] For example, within the last four weeks before the interview, over 40% of women felt depressed 'all the time' (n=9) and 'most of the time' (n=7), almost a half 'some of the time' (n=9) and 'little of the time' (n=9), while four women did not feel depressed. The average scores for 'feeling depressed' are similar across different groups of respondents in both locations (Appendix 4).

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irritability, desperation and inability to function which indicated suffering from trauma:

> '*Until now, I am still traumatised because of what happened. I get depressed occasionally, and it lasts for 20 days or so. I hate life, I don't want to go out, I can't stand noise, and I just want to stay alone.*' (Lotifa from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Women reported high levels of anxiety and more than half felt anxious either always or most the time.[4] A number of factors exacerbated women's distress from loneliness, lack of support, social exclusion, hostility against migrants to uncertainty in refuge. For example, refused asylum applications increased women's stress levels, coupled with other daily stressors, such as pressure to leave migrant shelters and find alternative accommodation in Tunisia. People seeking asylum are often confronted with powerlessness, dependency and living in uncertainty for years (Bjertrup et al., 2018; Vervliet et al., 2014). Prolonged waiting for asylum decisions is associated with increased stress, health problems and depression (Phillimore and Cheung, 2021; Reesp, 2003; Laban et al., 2008).

Evidently, African and Christian respondents, on average, reported higher levels of nervousness, restlessness and feeling worthless than Levantine and Muslim respondents, which may be explained by their journeys being more frequently interrupted and the asylum claims of many being rejected. Additionally, limited opportunities to work and study affected women's mental health, while racist incidents and discrimination adversely affected women's self-esteem and wellbeing:

> '*. . . a Turkish guy was walking near us, and when he realised I am Syrian, he spat to show his despise, and it affected me so badly.*' (Jameela from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

> '*No one speaks to me. No one is welcoming to me. This is the problem for me.*' (Sumaya from Ivory Coast, 40s, Medenine)

Research shows various forms of structural oppression are associated with poorer cognitive functioning, health behaviours, mental and physical health (Rosenthal, 2016). Daily stressors, such as racial prejudice, compound psychological consequences of VAW and increase the risk of developing or sustaining trauma and PTSD, especially among migrant survivors who are visibly different and easily identifiable by perpetrators.

Many survivors stopped trusting everyone but God (as discussed in Chapter 5), and self-isolated for fear of social harm. Those who witnessed abuse and death

[4] Almost half felt anxious 'all the time' (n=13) and 'most of the time' (n=8), and almost a quarter 'some of the time' (n=10), almost one fifth felt anxious 'a little of the time' (n=2) or 'none of the time' (n=5). The average scores for 'feeling anxious' are similar across different groups of respondents in both locations (Appendix 4).

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of other migrants felt helpless and angry for not being able to help them. Many responded in the survey that they had lost hope, although to different degrees.[5] Women grieved the unknown fate of their family members or the loss of their children, and some felt guilty about the unresolved matters which continued to affect them as distal stressors and often combined with proximal stressors.

Many women also reported intrusive thoughts, recurring memories, sleeping difficulties, nightmares, and flashbacks. Some women talked of numbness, saying '*I feel nothing*'. A handful of women contemplated suicide to end their suffering. Many remained unable to forget the terrors they experienced, and traumatic memories of armed conflict and sexual violence continued to evoke fear even in places of refuge, as recalled by two women:

> '*. . . I will never forget what happened to us . . . I have been in Türkiye for 5 years, and until now, I remember what happened with Daesh . . .*' (Lamia from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

> '*You've got a child; you don't know the father. Sometimes we make the effort to forget everything . . . if you sit down . . . it comes back . . . It hurts.*' (Sophia from DRC, 20s, Zarzis)

The connection between exposure to VAW and poor mental health outcomes is well established. For example, in other studies Syrian refugee and local women in Lebanon reporting transactional sex scored four times higher than other women in experiencing severe distress (Barada et al., 2021). Similarly, the impacts of trafficking are severe with high levels of psychological distress and violence, and the length of time being trafficked is associated with severity of mental health disorders (Oram et al., 2012).

Conclusion: The spiral continuum of violence against displaced women

The evidence presented here establishes how continuous and increasing exposure to the spiral of violence from conflict and transit to refuge, generates compounded harms over time. The chapter coins the term 'spiral continuum of violence' and contributes to theorising VAW in displacement, informing the development of relevant interventions to often unexpected and reinforcing turns of VAW in non-linear migration pathways and spiral of violence. A significant proportion of interviewed women were entrenched in the endless cyclical spiral of violence, wherein some types of violence perpetuated and escalated further abuses which intersected with each other with accumulative effects on survivors' wellbeing.

[5] Almost one third of women felt hopeless 'all the time' (n=10) and 'most of the time' (n=3), eleven women felt hopeless 'some of the time', five felt hopeless 'a little of the time' and nine 'none of the time'.

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Many of them experienced repeated and manifold VAW incidents inflicted by different perpetrators as risks of VAW escalated in conflict, transit and refuge. In the latter, women's experiences were coupled with structural violence and social inequalities—such as denied access to aid and racism.

Drawing on women's accounts, it is fair to conclude that the prevalence and severity of VAW increases with the length of forced migration experience, as multiple factors accumulate. Different forms of violence, as interconnected, sustained a spiral continuum of violence, manifested by the overlapping incidents of domestic violence, sexual harassment by strangers, trafficking and structural violence. In this chapter, importantly, the migrant journey has been identified as violence itself, and the lasting consequences of violence as part of the spiral continuum of violence, too. The mental and reproductive health and material needs of forced migrant survivors required immediate support in transit and refuge, including expert medical and psycho-social help, legal advice and safe housing. Specific measures, such as route-based and in refuge, are needed to address various forms of violence in different places and at the right time to reduce the mental health and economic burden on survivors and wider societies. Protection actors should recognise the temporospatial complexity of women's experiences to rupture the cycle of violence and prevent the spiral continuum from reinforcement. Chapter 4, using intersectional and ecological analysis, deconstructs the causes and drivers of VAW in displacement, placing exacerbated gender inequalities at the core of the spiral, intersecting with other factors at the centre. By exploring intersectional risk factors, the enquiry locates religion in the spiral violence continuum across the socioecology of displacement.

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4

Sourcing vulnerability

Intersectional religious influences

'*Women travelling alone are most vulnerable, but even if they are travelling with men, it doesn't matter; because the militias have weapons and they torture men and take their women . . .*' (Halima, in her 30s, originally from South Sudan, then in Medenine, Tunisia)

Introduction

This chapter contributes to the book's first objective by exploring how religion shapes women's vulnerability to violence. It explores the root causes and drivers of the spiral continuum of violence[1] against displaced women and how religion is entangled within these dynamics. I draw on real-life accounts from thirty-eight displaced Levantine and Sub-Saharan African women (Christian and Muslim) interviewed in 2019 in Türkiye and Tunisia. Women were invited to reflect on why they believed they had been subjected to abuse, discrimination and exclusion. I probed for conditions, characteristics and other factors that, in their view, exposed them to violence or heightened their risk—before migration and during conflict, transit and refuge. Given the sensitivity of these accounts, some readers may find some sections distressing and so they are encouraged to approach it with self-care.

The analysis shows that religion intersects with other risk factors to shape women's vulnerability to violence before displacement and during conflict, transit and refuge. Thus, religion is theorised here, as one of the intersecting socioecological vulnerabilities, shaping women's experiences of the violence continuum. By intersectional and socioecological vulnerabilities, I refer to risk factors related to social identity markers that accumulate at different levels of social ecology. In order to locate religion in women's experiences amid structural and situational factors, I explore a range of accumulative intersectional vulnerabilities, for

[1] The concept of the spiral continuum of violence, introduced in Chapter 2 of this volume, refers to the unexpected and reinforcing turns of VAW in non-linear displacement pathways, wherein some types of violence perpetuated and escalated further abuses which intersected with each other with accumulative effects on survivors' wellbeing.

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example exploring the intersection of gender, racial, migrant and religious discrimination across different stages of migration. As women's experiences guide this analysis, not all sections explicitly address religion, demonstrating in realistic terms that religion, as a cross-cutting issue, plays out in diverse ways across time and place. It rarely operates as a stand-alone factor in isolation, but often interacts with other dimensions such as gender, culture and race. Lived religion is fluid; at times a dominant and driving, contributing and passive force in shaping survivors' vulnerability to VAW in different contexts along the displacement experience.

I argue that there are two types of intersecting religious influences. First, internal influences, as women understand and apply religious constructs and vulnerabilities associated with patriarchal religious interpretations. Second, external influences, associated with identity-based discrimination which compound a spiralling continuum of violence. The analysis refers to the dual nature of religion—what religion is and does and as both socially-constructed and transcendent, as discussed in Chapter 1. The pragmatic approach to religion guides this chapter to reveal women's narratives of their experiences and subjective meanings and functions of religion in their lives.

The analysis operates at three interlinked ecological levels (through pre-migration, conflict, transit and refuge). At micro level, these are individual, relational, including personal characteristics and beliefs, and inter-personal factors. At meso level, these are situational and community factors, and at macro level, contextual and societal factors, including policy and structural. It is important to note these ecological levels are not neat categories and the interactions between vulnerabilities at different levels may overlap (Heise, 1998). These intersecting factors often relate to survivors' identity characteristics and social inequalities at different times and locations rather than at static categories of identity (Walby et al., 2012). In other words, factors related to family, peers, neighbours, community and wider society sit inside one another and constantly affect each other.

I structure this discussion around different stages of displacement commonly identified in women's stories as pre-displacement, conflict, transit and refuge, while exploring three intersections between:

1) The gender–culture–religion nexus in shaping experiences of domestic and interpersonal violence.
2) Gender, marital and migration status in shaping gendered violence in communities, such as verbal assault, discrimination and sexual harassment.
3) Race, religion and gender in shaping experiences of sexual and physical violence by non-partners during processes of migration and of gendered religious persecution.

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Deconstructing these factors, inclusive of religion, is critical to inform development of relevant interventions and policy to address VAW in displacement more effectively. I begin by briefly outlining gender inequalities as the root causes of VAW, followed by the gender–culture–religion nexus pre-displacement.

Gendered vulnerabilities pre-migration

From a feminist standpoint, the root causes of VAW are gender inequalities and power imbalances (Heise, 1998). In my research, both Levantine and African women talked about gender discrimination and difficulties they faced in their communities as women and girls before flight. They experienced subordination and patriarchal gender norms which permeated interpersonal, family and community levels. The African women talked about gender inequalities reinforced by poverty and bearing the burden of a disproportionate division of labour in the household:

> '*I left school to help out the rest of the family, and raise my younger siblings.*' (Zola from Eritrea, 20s, Medenine)

Many became entrapped in a vicious cycle of poverty pushing them into risky migratory pathways which increased their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. Some respondents were subjected to stigma associated with falling pregnant at a young age or because of the loss of their parents and associated social marginalisation. Some women described how discriminatory social norms controlled their choices, including FGM/C and forced marriage, and a few relied on relationships with men to escape poverty.

The Levantine women's narratives related to the gender–culture–religion nexus in which gender, cultural and religious norms intertwined. Around half of the Levantine women talked about family and spousal violence situated at the intersection of gender, culture and religion. While in some women's accounts it was difficult to separate these three elements one from another, according to other women, cultural and religious influences were distinct. For example, women often talked about culture and tradition as separate from religion, but all these three elements collectively shaped their gender roles, responsibilities and social expectations. The religion–culture nexus is particularly complex as they are often mutually constitutive, shaping social norms and power relations (Winter, 2006). Geertz (1973), for example, defined religion as a cultural system of symbols, influential moods, motivation and order of existence. Conversely, some scholars argue for a clear distinction between religion and culture (Deneulin and Bano, 2009), others highlight their fluid interdependence in shaping survivors' experiences

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within specific cultural-religious contexts (Ghafournia, 2017; Askeland and Døhlie, 2015). Similarly in this study, some women differentiated culture from religion, for instance they stated that culture requires from women certain social roles, such as to cook and clean, whereas religion requires from them to complete religious duties, such as prayers. While culture is not synonymous with religious practice and is shaped by historical and geographic factors (McKerl, 2009), it is crucial to avoid isolating religion from culture in contextual analyses of abuse.

Most participants said that religion did not affect their victimisation, but culture did:

> '*Violence against women is from our culture, it's not about religion, it's about our culture*' (Mona from Syria, 40s, Ankara, 2023)

> '*Even though my family is Muslim and Sunni, they harmed me, so religion has no relation to all these problems . . .*' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara, 2019)

Recognising the intersection of gender, culture and religion allows for a deeper understanding of how survivors construct meanings, justifications and responses to abuse. While examining the role of religion in women's experiences of VAW, I refer to social constructions of religion—these are different religious perspectives of what women considered as religion. But I also note the substantive meaning of religion—belief in theistic and non-theistic realities as many women held their 'religious truths', without implying normative judgement on what is and what is not 'true' religion.

Certain religious beliefs around gender roles shaped women's attitudes to gender dynamics in the family and acceptance of women's submissiveness and subordination shaping inequitable power dynamics indirectly driving VAW. The concept of '*qawamoon*' was recalled by women as key in governing their relationships with men in the household. *Qawamoon* is a Qur'anic precept concerning male authority and so ascribes men to take care of their wives financially and emotionally, which over centuries was interpreted with a patriarchal lens as an allowance for men to manage their women. This concept nominates a husband as a *qawamoon* in the family (Mir-Hosseini et al., 2015). Women I interviewed approached *qawamoon* in different ways—rejecting the superior role of men and negotiating the meaning of *qawamoon* in real-life. Some referred to *qawamoon* to justify power imbalances in the family, and their duty of obedience to their husband which they believed was required by their tradition and religion:

> '*. . . there is a verse that men have an advantage over women, and from this Surah* [Quranic chapter]*, the women should obey men . . . they didn't complete the Surah until the end, they just took these three words out of it: "Alrrijalu qawwamoona Aala alnnisai" [Men are the protectors and maintainers of women] and make their religious rules to control women.*' (Lamia from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

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Survivors of domestic violence who described persistent psychological and physical abuse were often previously or concurrently exposed to family violence. Many had been subjected to childhood neglect due to the loss of parents and poverty. Women reported different causes of family violence: restricted household resources and patriarchal cultural norms, male dominance and expectations of a wife's obedience. Further, survivors reported intergenerational gender norms influenced by toxic masculinities and family pressure on men to control their wives to prove their masculinity.

Amira, a mother of six in her late 30s who moved from Syria to Saudi Arabia and then to Türkiye, is one of the women who had experienced multiple family and spousal violence across her lifetime. Her story illustrates the complexity of the gender–culture–religion nexus underpinning VAW. Adolescent girls, like Amira, as an adult recalling her story from her teenage years, had little to say regarding their future and their families often took decisions concerning their marriage prospects that led to them ending their education. In early childhood she was told she would marry her cousin and at fifteen was expected to enter an arranged marriage. Despite her desire to continue education, exiting an arranged marriage was not an option for her as it would dishonour her father:

> '*My mother told me you can't do it to your father, if you change your mind now, they will say bad things about you and your father. You have honour. I told my mother, "OK don't stop this marriage and I won't do it to my father". He was good with us, he would treat girls and boys the same . . .*'. (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Newly married, Amira moved into her husband's family house and soon fell out with his mother. As a young wife she returned to her family home but re-joined her husband once she realised she was pregnant. Her uncle advised her husband to discipline her with physical force to ensure her obedience. Persistent spousal violence against Amira led to a subsequent miscarriage. While she insisted on divorce, she could not separate from her husband because of her uncle intervening and questioning her honour:

> '*No woman gets divorce in this family . . . look, you are my brother's daughter, you are my honour, I don't want you to get divorced because this is very bad thing for you . . .*' (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Amira was physically forced to reunite with her spouse by her uncle. She then sought a legal route to divorce, which was again impeded by her uncle bribing the lawyer and temporarily imprisoning her father who supported her divorce request. Amira's uncle and the community elders persuaded her to give her husband a final chance. With the family and community pressure and honour concerns, Amira, then a mother of two, returned to her husband and together moved to Saudi Arabia

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for economic reasons. There she had to deal with his infidelity and severe physical violence. Her uncle finally accepted her need for divorce, but Amira was then having more children and could not leave her spouse as she was economically dependent on him.

Several other research participants felt unable to withdraw from arranged marriage and seek divorce, because leaving a marriage was unacceptable in their traditions. Although respondents recognised the permissibility of withdrawal from marriage agreements in their religion, divorced women were shamed for threatening family honour.

> '*Divorce is permissible, but our traditions don't accept it. It concerns the family and family honour and traditions. It's not haram* [forbidden], *it's halal* [permissible], *but it's makruh* [permissible but disliked] …' (Shukri from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Several interviewees, like Amira, endured violence for years because of the cultural expectations that they should uphold family honour. For years they were stigmatised, shamed and blamed for 'dishonouring' their family. Some were encouraged to stay in abusive relationships by older women and family members who suffered violence during their life course and transmitted social acceptance of violence between generations. At household level, men were expected by their mothers to discipline their wives and wives were expected to tolerate physical punishment and show obedience to their spouses and mothers-in-law as good women. In several women's accounts, abusive husbands and mothers-in-law used religious precepts to condone their behaviours.

> '*Yes, my mother-in-law and my husband used religion to justify what they do; my mother-in-law would mistreat me and then say: "Allah doesn't allow mistreatment", and she prays as if she's the one being mistreated, and my husband used to use religion and tell me to be patient with his mother.*' (Hannah from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Religion also played an important role in survivors' tolerance of VAW. Amira believed that men can gently hit their wives in case of spousal disobedience, but said this was not applicable to her case, as the violence she suffered was intense and unjustifiable. She considered strict tribal and intergenerational gender norms enabled her suffering, including women's subordination and men's low religious literacy concerning women's rights.

Many other survivors of domestic violence believed that violence against women was not allowed in their religion, stating: '*In the Qur'an, it is not allowed to beat women*' (Jasmin from Iraq, 30s, Ankara). The majority of respondents spoke about the prophetic practice of non-violence and faith narratives to counter it. Among Muslims, central to the discussion of domestic violence is Qur'anic verse

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4:34 (from chapter *al-nisa*, in English 'women') which proposes conflict resolution in case of spousal disobedience/lewdness (Hamid, 2015; Al-Hibri, 2003). The process involves three subsequent stages, from verbal reprimand and leaving the conjugal bed to resorting to '*idribuhunna*', traditionally translated as 'lightly hitting' and compared to a tap with a toothbrush. The understanding of '*idribuhunna*', as discussed in Chapter 2, is contentious across Muslim faith communities with a variety of interpretations and attitudes, many contradicting the fundamental Qur'anic principles and the prophetic guidance such as love and mercy in the marriage (Hasan, 2013; Chaudhry, 2013).

The Levantine respondents shared varied understanding of the Qur'anic verse 4:34, noting that it has historically been (mis)understood as granting permission for spousal violence. While a quarter disagreed with any hitting (five women), a fifth agreed with gentle hitting, two each agreed with hitting in case of women's mistakes and in case of infidelity. However, none applied a religious justification to the disproportionate violence they experienced. Interviewees derived subjective and sometimes the same meanings from the same passage of the sacred text concerning 'hitting' in case of spousal misconduct (in Arabic '*idriboohunna*'). For instance, Safa, being deprived of literacy skills, commented on the Qur'an:

> '*It says that if you fear that your women will not be good women, for instance cheating on their husbands or getting away from their religion . . . that means you should beat her . . . My reading wasn't very good lately, so I wasn't reading the Qur'an much . . .*' (Safa from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Respondents who felt more literate in their religious teachings explained the three stages that a man ought to follow to reprimand his wife from a scriptural perspective. These stages were firstly advising, secondly separating from her bed (in Arabic *waohjuroohunna*) and then the third step—subject to interpretation—'light hitting' (in Arabic *Idriboohunna*), if the misconduct continued and previous steps had no success. While a few interviewees explained the term *idriboohunna* as 'gentle hitting' without force, they pointed out that some men and women misunderstood this verse and took it as permission to hit their wives.

> '*. . . This verse means that if you fear that your women have done something forbidden, then yes hit them but very gently, but men understand this verse like, you can do everything, you can beat her in any way you like.*' (Roqaya from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Survivors of domestic violence differed in their understandings of what constitutes misconduct and is deserving of spousal reprimand. According to some, spousal disobedience concerned any immoral and anti-religious acts, with two women relating it to neglect of worship and another two with adultery.

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> '*There are some women who deserve that, some cross the red lines in Islam, and the verse is specific to them. Some women might get married and even after they get married, they go and commit adultery, these are bad women and the verse is for them.*' (Saira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

A handful of women in abusive situations said that their husbands knew very little about their religion and manipulated religion to condone their constructs of masculinity. The conflation of culture and religion, manifested in low religious literacy and patriarchal cultures, shaped gender norms of subordination, enabling misuse of power in gender relations. Several studies showed that abusers misuse religious precepts to control their spouses and justify their behaviour, and this is rooted in patriarchy (e.g. Carlson, 2005). Religious teachings can become a tool and justification for domestic violence by which perpetrators assume power and control for their own agenda (McKerl, 2009). Male dominance can manifest in restricting women's access to religious spaces, freedom of movement and limiting women's decision-making powers (Al Kahteeb, n.d.).

Finally, religious beliefs, such as in destiny or fate, sometimes delayed women from seeking help and led them to tolerate abuse. Beliefs in religious incentives led some survivors to tolerate spousal abuse in the hope of divine reward. For example, one older participant accepted verbal abuse from her husband, assuming it was his right to get angry with her during his illness. She felt obliged to take care of him with hopes of divine reward and was advised by a religious leader to appreciate her husband's good qualities:

> '*. . . Sometimes I blame myself for not leaving earlier, but I go back and think that this was Allah's will and it happened, and I pray Istikhara* [a prayer seeking God's guidance] *before everything . . . the Sheikh used to tell me that my husband has a good heart, but the problem is his mother.*' (Lotifa from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Such accounts demonstrate multiple factors and actors influenced women's decision making and safety-seeking over their life course. Lived religion—religious interpretations and constructs—shaped women's beliefs, experiences of violence and behaviours of their family and community that created conditions in which VAW could be enabled.

Intensified vulnerability in conflict and transit

Multifarious factors and multiple discriminations shape complex experiences of forced migrant women (Sokoloff, 2008; Chavis and Hill, 2008). Analysis of the data from my research in Türkiye and Tunisia indicates key themes centred around the intersectionality of race, legal status, religion, gender and marital status. Gender

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inequalities and VAW experiences were intensified and reinforced in conflict and transit by religious, racial and migrant discrimination, closed borders and the protracted nature of the migration crisis and violent disorder in conflict settings at micro, meso and macro levels discussed below.

First, it is important to acknowledge that respondents' migration and VAW experiences were located at the intersection of a quadruple crisis—the crisis of development, humanitarianism, conflict and migration. Women talked about poverty, lack of protection, violent disorder and neglect of migrants as the main causes of their suffering and victimisation. The African survivors described lawlessness in Libya, international organised crime and lack of protection and support across their migratory pathways. The Levantine survivors described protracted armed conflict and impunity under both occupation and during internal displacement. Interviewees spoke of different reasons for fleeing their countries. Most respondents fled conflict and religious and political persecution (Syria, Iraq, DRC, Ivory Coast, Sudan), some poverty (Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia), forced marriage (Cameroon), FGM/C (Sierra Leone) and military conscription (Eritrea). Several respondents, intentionally travelling to Libya for work, became displaced when the country descended into lawlessness.

Many women I interviewed spoke about fearing detention, deportation and compulsory return. Restrictive immigration policies and the absence of the rule of law exposed migrants to extreme violence in detention and prisons. For instance, Libya, a non-signatory of 1951 Refugee Convention, criminalised all entries into the country and detained forced migrants. In addition, international agreements aimed at strengthening the borders and detention centres prolonged respondents' journeys and increased vulnerabilities (Akkerman, 2021). Zola, in her early 20s, was one of the several survivors of rape affected by immigration restrictions and externalisation of the EU borders. She fled conscription and poverty, leaving her two children behind in Eritrea, hoping to find a better future for her family. Seeking to reach Europe, she travelled through Egypt to reach Libya where she was imprisoned, raped multiple times and impregnated by armed prison guards. She lost her third child in labour while in detention without medical care. Travelling in a convoy towards Europe with thirty others, she was the only girl from among the ten who managed to escape detention and survive, with twenty dying during the bombardment in Libya, and Zola witnessing their deaths:

> '*I was also raped, I got pregnant after being raped . . . any guard at any time can come and get you. If they call your name, you can't say anything, you are forced to. If you say no, he'll just shoot you or put a gun to your head, you have no choice . . . he'll just drag you out of the room to another, two or three would hold you . . . So many people died in front of me, there were airplanes that were bombing us, some of the girls who were with me got killed . . .*' (Zola from Eritrea, 20s, Medenine)

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She repeatedly attempted suicide. Eventually she escaped Libya and walked to Tunisia to face further destitution and life in limbo. She lived in an international migrant shelter and received weekly vouchers insufficient to pay for weekly food and hygiene items. Speaking Arabic, she developed local social connections and searched for informal jobs. She suffered from destitution and family separation, and had planned to continue her journey towards Europe.

Zola's story is one among many forced migrants' stories in which lengthy asylum and resettlement procedures exposed them to additional risks. Halima, fleeing ethnic cleansing in Sudan, was another participant who, during her search for safety with her family, faced ongoing exposure to violence during her transit and lengthy refugee procedures. First, she went with her husband to Cairo and then to Benghazi by smugglers, and from Benghazi to Tripoli in 2013 where she stayed for five years. In Tripoli, her husband was kidnapped, imprisoned and tortured by the militia.

> '*They took my husband and asked for ransom. If you didn't have money, they would torture you and then kill you … We registered with the UNHCR in 2014. They didn't follow our resettlement case up for two years … After that … in 2018 [I] renewed the registration* [for resettlement scheme] *… We wanted to go to another country …*' (Halima from South Sudan, 30s, Medenine)

After her husband's release, they moved to southern Libya to seek safety but returned to the capital two years later to apply for refugee resettlement. In 2019, the war broke out in their area of residence, causing large-scale destruction and they moved to a temporary school shelter—sharing a place with many other people. The conditions were dire and unsafe. One day her husband was declared wanted by an armed group after his appearance on a local TV channel where he criticised the conditions migrants lived in.

> '*There was war in the place we were living* [in Libya] *… we went to the shelter where the militias kept arriving …* [disguised] *as police officers … I applied for asylum … They are going through the procedures, but it was very slow.*' (Halima from South Sudan, 30s, Medenine)

International organisations could not help them because there were too many people in need of help, so they decided to flee on their own. Moving towards the Tunisian borders through sticky and salty mud and barbed wire, they walked in silence, praying the whole time. They arrived exhausted but received help from the local police and local charity. Halima's story of protracted displacement for over a decade points to the long-term and accumulative effects of displacement, with violence spiralling across borders. Lengthy resettlement procedures and limited

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protection contributed to the perpetuation of violence against migrants left without support. Such processes contributed to *invisibilising* the exploitation of forced migrants and pushing them to take additional risks to reach their destinations.

Intersections of gender, marital and migration status

At an individual and interpersonal level women were subjected to violence because of vulnerability related to their gender, marital and migration status. Women travelling alone were frequently exposed to VAW in transit, especially in pan-African routes. Yet women travelling with their spouses were also raped when separated from their spouses and often did not disclose their experiences to family.

> '*When things* [political persecution] *started to happen, my husband had to flee and he travelled towards the border with Burkina Faso. The war had started, and I was trapped. I was raped. He doesn't even know about that. I did not tell him about my situation.*' (Feiza from Ivory Coast, 40s, Medenine)

Widowed and single women usually joined other groups of migrants, often moving by night and sleeping in unknown places, in so-called 'houses of connection'[2] on African transit routes. The majority relied on smugglers to reach their destinations in exchange for high fees. At different points, unaccompanied forced migrant women were targeted and threatened with sexual and physical violence by traffickers, militia, authorities and smugglers, who often treated them as their property. African respondents reported that the relations between a forced migrant and a smuggler became transactional across Sub-African transit countries wherein women's bodies became a new currency in 'sex for travel passes'. Syrian women travelling without men and waiting at the borders in the camps attracted the attention of strangers, including soldiers and smugglers:

> '*When I was with the smugglers, because I was a single woman, everyone wanted to take advantage of me . . . in a sexual way . . . but I was very strong, nothing could happen to me if I'm not willing . . .*' (Kameela from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

While the Levantine women spoke about resisting the smugglers, African women often were forced at gunpoint to engage in sexual relations. The women exploited in Libya described that younger and slimmer girls were more likely to be abused for a prolonged time in prisons and forced into prostitution in Libya, and some respondents witnessed such women dying from exploitation. African migrants described feeling powerless with many losing control over their lives:

[2] A *house of connection* refers to a transit place where migrants temporarily stay while awaiting their onward journey.

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> *'You don't have the control anymore, because you don't know where you're, where you're going, what's going to happen, so I was confused. You don't have any help, you have no one to support you, you are alone, no protection …'* (Sophia from the DRC, 20s, Zarzis)

Without protection, respondents feared unknown men and smugglers. Unaccompanied women felt physically incapable of defending themselves against armed men. Some women continued their journeys in 'rescue' relationships in the hope of better protection and expedited resettlement. For example, in Tunisia, the issue of sexual abuse and exploitation in 'pretend' marriages was reported as a growing concern (Pertek et al., 2020). Some adolescent girls agreed to pretend they had marital relations with partners met in Libya in the expectation of better protection and expediated refugee procedures for couples.

Intersections of race, religion and gender

Respondents were violated not only because of their gender but because of being a migrant of a different race to natives of those countries. I use the term migrant persecution here to denote the systematic discrimination targeting racialised migrants in conflict-affected Libya. African women said they were targeted, kidnapped, trafficked, enslaved, tortured, raped and imprisoned mainly due to their racial and migrant identities. What is observable is that migrants and refugees were not only racialised but '*migrantised*' regardless of their background. I use the term '*migrantised*' to describe a process of homogenisation of racially diverse migrants and inhumane treatment of anybody resembling a migrant in Libya, thereby categorising people according to race and migrant status. Belonging to 'othered' races and to other nationalities exposed most respondents to discrimination and exacerbated the risk of SGBV in transit. Syrian women talked about experiencing hatred and violence from Turkish border control agents because they were Syrian refugees. In addition, some reported discrimination from *Alawi* soldiers in domestic transit because they were Sunni Syrians:

> *'… the soldiers that are supporting the Syrian government, they don't sympathise with* [Sunni] *Syrians and they send them back, but other soldiers usually sympathise more and let Syrians in.'* (Zaafira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

African women in Libya were visibly different to the local population and easily identifiable as illegal migrants which led to them being exposed to abuse. Of those who were abused by non-partner men of different races, some believed they were violated in transit because of their race and racism.

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'*Perhaps it was because of my skin . . . my colour isn't light . . . They don't like people of different races . . . people who are different to them, in Libya, they don't like black people.*' (Sumaya from Ivory Coast, 40s, Medenine)

Further probing the question 'why were women subjected to abuse?', several women were not sure or did not know whether their victimisation was racially motivated but commonly considered it as an attempt to humiliate migrant women and men:

'*Oh, I don't know, I think it* [rape] *is because we're too black . . . I don't think so . . . I don't know if it's because we are too black. For me, I believe it's a sabotage, the way they humiliate people, because, even men! They raped even the men . . .*' (Sophia from the DRC, 20s, Zarzis)

According to the social constructionist approach to sexual violence, both women and men are potential targets for perpetrators using sexual violence to '*masculinize*' their own sexual, ethnic, religious and political identity and '*feminize*' victims' sexual, ethnic, religious and political identity (Skjelsbaek, 2001: 225). Yet the majority did not associate their experiences with their religious identity or could not ascertain whether the attacks against them were motivated by their religious identity, which was often an invisible feature:

'*In Libya I was abused because I don't know if it is because I am a Christian or they are not Christian . . . They don't ask me, "Are you a Christian? Are you a Muslim?" No. They just abuse me.*' (Melanie from Cameroon, 30s, Medenine)

Gloria, like other African respondents endured sex trafficking, however she was the only respondent who directly associated her victimisation with her religious identity. Fleeing the DRC in her 30s with her toddler son after losing her spouse in armed conflict, she travelled undercover together with eleven women to Libya by a complex route: Congo Brazzaville, Gabon, Cameroon, Benin, Niger, Tamanrasset, Algeria and Deb Deb, by canoes, cars, buses and on foot. Controlled by smugglers, she had to endure sex in exchange for travel passes, being sold and forced at gunpoint to sex with soldiers in various military bases and at checkpoints. Exploited by men of different backgrounds across her multi-country transit and in Libya, she pointed out that she was abused by Muslim smugglers because she was a black Christian.

'*There were times, in Niger, where Muslims abused us . . . near to the Sahara desert. The men who drove the jeeps* [smugglers] *. . . sometimes they'd rape you. I would say, "no, no, I have a baby!" Even in Libya, they'd rape you before they put you in prison. They'd take five to 10 girls, they sold them to other men. They'd rape and*

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> *then the men they sold you to would rape you . . . they don't rape Arab women. They only rape the black women. They think, she must be a Christian, so they abuse you.*' (Gloria from DRC, 30s, Zarzis)

Gloria was sold between different smugglers until she reached Libya, where she was again sexually exploited and then imprisoned because she had no ransom money to pay for her release.

> '*When they were tired of you, they'd say, "here is a telephone, call your family and get them to send money over." This is how we were imprisoned. You can't get out . . .*' (Gloria from DRC, 30s, Zarzis)

Gloria spent one year in Libya in different prisons. She then managed to escape and begin her travel to Europe. In the sea crossing her boat capsized but she managed to rescue herself and her son from drowning and was eventually transported to Tunisia.

Only a limited number of social scientists have tackled gender-based violence from a hate crime perspective (DeKeseredy, 2008) and there is institutional resistance to recognising gender-based hate crime (Silvia Gagliardi et al., 2023). Hate crimes and incidents of gender-based violence are rarely conceptualised as intersecting forms of violence and more often as religious discrimination (Halrynjo and Jonker, 2015). Thus, sexual violence has rarely been recognised as an act of hate crime, even though the victims may hold beliefs that they were targeted because of their religious identity, as voiced by Gloria above.

Similarly, religion is rarely considered as a potential vulnerability factor in the trafficking of forced migrants. A study on migrant vulnerability in Libya mentions that religion was not a vulnerability factor affecting 'protection incidents' of refugees and migrants in Libya, contradicting the general assumption that Christian migrants may be at increased risk (Nissling and Murphy-Teixidor, 2020). Conversely, several Christian and Muslim survivors emphasised that migrants were targeted for exploitation in Libya regardless of their religious background and, like Zola, many because of their inability to pay a ransom:

> '*. . . for most Libyans, it doesn't matter to them whether you're a Christian or Muslim. In Libya, they say, "Give us money" and if you cannot, you'll be raped if you're a girl, or beaten if you're a guy. They don't take religion into consideration; they abuse everybody without asking about their religion.*' (Zola from Eritrea, 20s, Medenine)

All survivors of exploitation in the Libyan setting, who I interviewed, mentioned that they were unable to pay their smuggling fees and ransom which resulted in prolonged imprisonment and trafficking. Levantine respondents usually mobilised sufficient funds from savings and selling belongings, for their

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costly transit. Some West African respondents were deceived with the promise of decent earning opportunities in Libya, had their passports confiscated and upon arrival were sold into prostitution and expected to pay substantial charges to be released. Many respondents explained that they lost contact with kin during migration, often because their phones were confiscated, which reduced their pool of available support. Without economic resources and social connections, they faced protracted violence in prisons, detentions and trafficking situations.

Sectarian persecution: embodying the enemy

African migrants, interviewed in Tunisia, experienced racialised persecution and around half mentioned a religious conflict at origin which prompted them to flee. For Levantine respondents, in turn, religious identity commonly arose as a compounding vulnerability as they felt targeted because of their Sunni religious affiliation. Syrian and Iraqi respondents talked about religious persecution, politicisation of their religious identities, inter-sectarian discrimination and indoctrination as key risk factors. Levantine women shared that different military factions manipulated and misconstrued their religious identities, in order to justify their attacks.

Many talked about additional controls of movement and deprivation of their freedom resultant from their inter-sectarian divisions. Sunni respondents, in particular, reported violence from the Shia militias. Internally displaced women explained that, during domestic transit, they feared revealing their religious identity at checkpoints, which were often manned by different military factions, as they risked persecution due to their perceived religious and political affiliations.

Ferhana fled Iraq in her late 30s with her husband and four children following religious persecution and war. Since Daesh was hiding in her town, Americans and Shias bombarded her house, killing all her husband's family. She fled with family to Old Mosul which was besieged, leaving her without food for six months. Internally displaced and seeking protection, she faced attacks from different factions who made assumptions about her and her family's loyalties based on their appearance and assumed religious identity. In Ferhana's and other Levantine women's experience, armed groups made an assessment about whether she was an enemy based on the clothing she wore—a phenomenon which I call 'embodying the enemy'. Women felt targeted across different settings and by different actors based on their visible appearance but imposed and assumed sectarian belonging, in ways increasing risks of religious persecution. When forced to wear additional attire, e.g. *niqab* and outer cover, Ferhana was perceived by other factions to be from an armed group, yet when they moved to Daesh-held areas, they were attacked and accused of apostasy:

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'*In old Mosul, when we were in the Daesh-held area, Shia and Americans bombed us, and when we moved to the other side, Daesh considered us to have committed Riddah* [apostasy] *and they bombed us . . . After Daesh left, the Americans would enter random houses and say "you're from Daesh" and take the men to jail, but there are a lot of innocent people . . .*' (Ferhana from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

As a result, women re-adapted their religious attire moving between different territories of the conflict. Similarly, in Shia-ruled areas, previously occupied by Daesh, they continued being accused of having belonged to Daesh, which resulted in innocent men and women getting arrested and persecuted:

'*When we arrived in the area, we couldn't go outside, maybe someone would beat you or go and report to Shia community that this person is from Daesh. They would also come to your house at night and take both women and men to jail without charge/trial.*' (Ferhana from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

Many Syrian women talked about their religious identity, under the occupation of Daesh, being suppressed. Their religious beliefs, practices and worldviews were negated and shaken, even to the extent of questioning their religion, mistrusting others and restricting their religious practices. Women felt they lost freedom of religion and felt threatened:

'*I lived with Daesh for five months. They wanted to make us go backward, to the era of ignorance. If a strange man is in your neighbourhood, you should cover your face and hands, and if you are seen walking with your husband with your face uncovered, they will stone your husband. I felt so scared, we arrived at a situation where we were thinking, "Is that Islam?". . . They would find mistakes in everything we do . . . But our religion is not like that.*' (Amina from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

'It's forbidden to talk about religion in Syria . . . Al Assad is Alawi, not Sunni; we can't talk about our religion. It's a red line.' (Shukri from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

These women feared for their lives in the occupied areas. Living in terror with increased gendered vulnerability during conflict, they dreaded unexpected house raids, captivity and being forced to watch atrocities. Those who unintentionally disrespected clothing rules said they risked abduction. Syrian women said that their adolescent girls faced heightened vulnerability, attracting the attention of militia groups upon displacement and at the borders.

In addition, a few women shared that rape survivors were unable to seek support, partially due to stigma and shame in local communities due to their tradition and religion. Women feared disclosing rape not only due to safety considerations,

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but also because they worried that returning perpetrators would harm their families. This chapter thus far has explored VAW pre-migration, in conflict and transit, it will now discuss accumulated causes of VAW in countries of refuge.

Accumulative vulnerabilities in places of refuge

As illustrated in Chapter 3, violence against displaced women multiplied and intensified in places of refuge. In this section, I explore additional factors, such as gender, racial, migrant and religious discrimination, which exacerbated gender inequalities in places of refuge amid hostile immigration policies, reinforcing women's vulnerabilities to violence. Vulnerabilities interacted between and within inter-personal, community and structural levels across contexts. I begin from the macro level, structural and community factors followed by inter-personal factors at the micro and meso level.

Race and conditional aid assistance

Humanitarian and social welfare programme structures excluded some vulnerable groups from assistance. Although in theory Syrian refugees could apply for residence and temporary protection, around a third of Syrian interviewees were ineligible for temporary protection under the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) scheme funded by the European Union in Türkiye and thus lived in severe destitution. For example, some lived in ruined housing, abandoned settlements and basements without heating and water and with major safety hazards which I observed during interviews in their homes. Uncertain migration laws prevented some respondents from gaining legal status and accessing public services, such as schools and hospitals, in Türkiye:

> '*If you don't have Kimlik* [residence card] *here, you have no life. You can't go anywhere, to hospital, to school, you can't ask for anything without Kimlik*' (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Women without formal documentation were worst affected. Those without IDs could not obtain residence cards, and so access work and move between cities for better opportunities. Those without residence were not qualified for cash assistance programmes which were considered discriminatory, especially by women who did not meet the strict ESSN enrolment criteria, for example, married mothers with less than three children. It also disadvantaged irregular migrants of non-Syrian nationality and Syrian women with transitional marital status whose husbands rejected granting them a divorce officially. For some respondents, their

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ESSN entitlement ceased when they failed to report in a timely manner address or familial changes to authorities. Similarly, in several instances, single and widowed women lost aid from charities due to community-based gossip, concerning potential marriage and changing household circumstances. They were perceived by aid administrators as no longer eligible for support:

> '*I used to receive help from organizations but some Syrians told these organizations that I was married, and that my husband gets 500 TL a week so they stopped supporting me and removed my children's name from the help list*' (Shamila from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Two Iraqi women reported low levels of support, or none, in refuge, and similarly most African respondents felt abandoned. Many depended on charities for survival, without sufficient protection from organisations mandated to support them. Aid conditionality based on nationality (Almasri, 2023) meant differentiated approaches to refugee reception in Türkiye, favouring Syrians being granted temporary protection.

Ferhana, an Iraqi mother of four, was one of the participants who received no public support upon arrival with her family to Türkiye through official routes as tourists. Her application for a temporary residence card (Kimlik) was refused and she and her family received no assistance. The ESSN provider refused to help them because of their nationality and advised them to return to Iraq.

> '*We went to the Red Crescent and they told us that there's no help for Iraqi people; just for Syrians, and they told us to go back to Iraq. He asked for an identity card, I gave him my passport and when he saw it, he said there's no help for Iraqis, you came here for tourism.*' (Ferhana from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

Helpless without a residence card, Ferhana struggled to access already overstretched local charities. Enduring post-war medical impairments meant she and her husband could not work and the family relied on their four children's street labour for survival. Ferhana felt powerless and unable to change their situation due to ill health and considered her children's out-of-school situation as a human rights violation. Her husband became physically violent when angered, provoked by, Ferhana believed, their protracted displacement conditions, including his loss of family and wealth during the war in Iraq.

Likewise, the lack of a national migration legal framework in Tunisia and of legal immigration status largely precluded forced migrant access to basic rights such as to work and study. Living in precarious conditions, African interviewees feared deportation. A high influx of migrants outgrew the Tunisian migrant infrastructure, leading to destitution of migrants, overcrowding and closure of migrant shelters without notice due to dire conditions.

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'*Once conditions got that bad, there were like 80 people to one bathroom. Forget your humanitarian standard, but think about human decency. And then beyond that, it got so bad that it had to be closed down and we didn't even know about. There was no contingency. Nobody knows where people went. They even didn't tell anybody.*' (Alex, Humanitarian Co-ordinator, INGO, Medenine)

Yet, the ongoing migrant crisis in Tunisia was not recognised by the international community as a humanitarian emergency, which meant underfunding of services and limited organisational capacities. For example, some international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) willing to assist migrants faced access barriers in supporting those living in shelters co-ordinated by international organisations responsible for refugee and migration management. The representatives of INGOs described that they had to establish protection mechanisms beyond the UN system.

Weekly vouchers (around £1.50 a day) only reached those living in the UN shelters and were insufficient to meet gender-specific basic needs, while migrants living in urban settings received no assistance. Zola, after surviving severe sexual exploitation in Libya, upon reaching Tunisia depended on weekly vulnerable migrant vouchers and peer support. She had to share hygiene items and clothes, arguing that the international protection system had failed them.

'*There are special needs for girls like clothes, like hygiene products for women . . . They give us 30 dinar food vouchers, and it's so little . . . For hygiene and necessary items, we give each other clothes if someone doesn't have them, and women from Somalia or from Eritrea are treated the same because we've all been through a lot. Why can we, as refugees, communicate between ourselves and share things with others but Human Rights Watch and other organizations can't?*' (Zola from Eritrea, 20s, Medenine)

Survivor mothers, who gave birth to children born of sexual violence, went into debt to cover the costs of baby milk and diapers, as vouchers were not provided for children below eight months. Without public support, those in private housing borrowed to pay their rent and often relied on the generosity of their neighbours. Barely living, some survivors wished to leave for Europe again, re-entering Libya for transit despite heightened SGBV risks.

Ayesha, in her 30s, from Sierra Leone (Appendix 1) was one among some participants who experienced not only accumulative but 'reverse vulnerability' upon her return to Libya as part of the continuum of violence she experienced. She was forced to flee after her community rejected her for refusing to perform FGM/C on other girls—a harmful tradition executed by her deceased grandma. After first reaching Libya, she tried to travel to Europe by dinghy, which capsized leaving fifty-three migrants dead. She saved herself and an unaccompanied boy and was

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transported to Tunisia (Chapter 5 details her story of survival). After living in destitution and facing discrimination, she applied to the IOM for resettlement to another country, Papua New Guinea. But facing rejection, she returned to Libya with the intention of reaching Europe, where she was kidnapped and forced into prostitution, becoming pregnant by rape. She had no resources to pay for her ransom. She walked back to Tunisia, where she received medical assistance, gave birth to twins and received refugee status. She had been waiting for resettlement for four years and eventually was resettled to a Scandinavian country with her sons in 2022.

In particular, the lack of decent work opportunities deepened women's economic vulnerability. Divorcees, widows and single women with caring responsibilities struggled to find employment, and when working received unequal pay, sometimes no pay and were expected to work harder than locals for less.

> '*I do not get paid but there is always something that I can do. I left all these jobs because all bosses pay with problems* [delays]. *If I am working, they always want something from me to pay* [for accommodation]. *I find work in restaurants . . . I worked in the kitchen but they would not leave me to do my job. If there were lorries for deliveries, it was me who had to go and do it. Even though they have men to do it.*' (Gloria from DRC, 30s, Zarzis)

Without work permits, displaced women in Tunisia relied on informal work (such as domestic cleaning) and, due to a lack of childcare, often brought their children along. Similarly in Türkiye, those with professional qualifications (for instance, law and medical professions) could not practise and thus were under-employed, underpaid and worked excessive hours in insecure employment.

In addition, some women could not continue their education, due to practical and language barriers. The security concerns played a role—some refugee families did not send their adolescent girls to schools (Türkiye), while children with irregular status were not eligible to access schools (Tunisia). Social isolation and language barriers compounded respondents' exclusion, and those who spoke local languages were more likely to engage with local communities, access information and resources.

Moreover, many described racial discrimination in the health and housing sectors, with Syrian respondents in Türkiye mentioning concerns over hate crime, reinforcing feelings that they were unwelcome. The health of many interviewees deteriorated in displacement, preventing some from working, and compounding their vulnerability to abuse, as in the case of Safa. For her, illness in her early 20s increased her dependency on her spouse and led to destitution due to restricted mobility and socio-economic participation. She developed symptoms of rheumatism during the war in Syria, and initially fled to Lebanon where she stayed for six years. Safa felt unwelcome in Lebanon especially as inter-sectarian divisions and anti-Syrian violence escalated with the return of Lebanese Shia martyrs'

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bodies from the Syrian war. Also, once in public, she was confronted with an offer of transactional sex by a car driver:

> '*Once as I was walking trying to hail a taxi, a car stopped and the man asked me, "Will you go with me for 30 minutes? I'll give you $50" I looked at him and told him to get lost.*' (Safa from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Without access to adequate healthcare, she travelled to Syria against her husband's will to access specialised treatment for a rapidly progressing disease. During her absence, her husband married a second wife. Disputes and violence against and among the two wives began, with her husband becoming more violent. He hit Safa when she requested money for her medical appointments:

> '*There were many problems between him and the second wife. One time I asked him to go to the doctor, but he refused because he had no money at the time, and I started talking with my husband* [an argument developed] *and he hit me, and when that happened, I told him I wanted him to divorce me.*' (Safa from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

She believed that a man can hit his wife if she neglects her religious duties, but this was not the cause of the harm she suffered. Due to her illness, she was unable to work and remained dependant on her husband but tensions of the polygamous relationship led her to flee with the support of her sisters.

With kin support, she fled with her children to Türkiye, first being smuggled to Syria to avoid legal costs from staying too long in Lebanon. However, mobility restrictions delayed her entry to Türkiye. She eventually crossed the border by car and stayed alone in a refugee camp before joining her family in Ankara. With charitable assistance, she evidenced her disease and secured her residence permit. Unable to work, she relied on family and charity, confronting sexual harassment in public.

Ethnic, racial and religious discrimination

Another layer of women's vulnerability was ethnic division. Levantine women who fled religious divisions said that upon arrival to Türkiye they encountered 'new' divisions between the Turkomans and Arabian Syrians in accessing aid. Some Arab Syrian women emphasised the advantage held by Turkoman Syrians, as native Turkish speakers, in mobilising resources and assistance:

> '*There is discrimination between Syrian Turkomans and normal Syrians; Turkomans get help more. They told me to my face that this help was for Turkomans, not for us … sometimes when the help reached us, we found that they* [Turkomans] *had*

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> *already taken all the sugar and oil. We moved out of Syria because there's sectarianism between Alawis and Sunnis and came here to face the same problems but between Turkomans and Arabian Syrians . . . I told them . . . I have five children, but they say, "No, it's* [sugar and oil] *only for us".* (Soraya from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Similarly, Iraqi participants were subjected to racial discrimination and felt that Syrians were prioritised in aid distribution in Türkiye. Those who did not meet the criteria for official refugee aid were left without any public support in Türkiye, such as non-Syrian women. Meanwhile, most migrants I spoke to in Tunisia experienced destitution and several Christian respondents mentioned experiencing religious discrimination and when probed for details, talked about racialised incidents. Racial and religious discrimination amalgamated in their experiences, which in turn intensified racial barriers for African Christian survivors:

> '*When you say you're Christian they won't like you . . . people don't understand that this is the same God . . . if you say you're Christian, they will say you're not their sister . . . and that they won't help you again.*' (Grace from Ghana, 20s, Medenine)

The perceived bias against Christians not only sometimes inhibited their access to aid but also limited their work opportunities, as some employers preferred to hire Muslim migrants. 'Othering' is embedded in social relations and practices more broadly (Mirza, 2013:7), and in this context such processes exacerbate the vulnerability and social exclusion of visibly different migrants, as was evident for African migrants in Tunisia.

Aid dependency, gender and marital status

As stated, many respondents relied on charity and kindness of others. In seeking support, they were persistently exposed to sexual harassment. Some said that informal aid was often transformed into harassment, in which single women, divorcees and widows were offered material assistance in exchange for intimate relations or marriage. Notably, sexual grooming of women from religious minorities can be ideologically motivated (Tadros, 2020). Among refugee women I met in Türkiye, surprisingly almost all of them had experienced harassment by men in host communities as they were perceived to be needy and thus received indirect and direct offers for transactional sex.

Sexual harassment of refugee women was reported by a Syrian woman, Kameela, who, as a doctor, was approached by other Syrian women seeking abortions. She revealed that single women below thirty-five were most vulnerable when seeking aid, especially around religious holidays when practical needs (for food

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and clothes) increased in their households, and when arranging formalities and meeting people in authority:

> '*. . . single Syrian women in Ankara constitute about 90% of refugees, widows or divorcees, so they exploit them. They tell them that they'll cover their needs . . . provide for them, but in return, they'd do what those men want . . . So, I'd say 70% of women here had to go through "sex for food" . . . All women are vulnerable to this because they receive aid from organizations, and to receive it continuously, they need to do it . . .I'd say those that are 35 and below are more vulnerable . . . To get a residence permit, she'd have to wait 3 days, but if you sleep with a man in power, he'd make it easier and faster for her and he'd even ask her to bring her friends.*' (Kameela from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Zainab was one of the respondents harassed by local men who offered her 'transactional assistance'. Aged twenty, she fled Syria to Türkiye together with her husband and two children. In refuge her spouse was physically violent, but she didn't report him to the police due to fear of losing her children. She could not work without childcare and her husband returned to Syria where he went missing. While moving houses in Ankara, she lost her ESSN entitlement, due to a change of address, becoming dependant on informal charity. Turkish men supported her through providing groceries until she rejected their marriage offers:

> '*They would help me few times, and then they would say let's keep in contact by phone, and if you refuse, the help stops. They would say either we get married, but secretly with no rights, or they stop helping . . . they'd start texting me on WhatsApp, like good morning, good evening and, after a while, they'd send hearts and when I went to ask for help again, they would ask me to marry them, but I would refuse. I would tell them that I have kids and that I am not sure if my husband is still alive or not, and they say "perhaps he's dead", but are they more knowledgeable than Allah? My husband could come in that door at any moment. So, after I refuse, they no longer help me.*' (Zainab from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Refugee identity, perceived by local men as signalling vulnerability and neediness, became the dominant lens through which these women were seen and was used as a key mechanism of control and mistreatment. Women were also harassed on the streets by Turkish men. Some respondents considered that portraying Syrian women as 'cheap' or 'for sale' was in itself an act of violence. In addition, social tolerance of interpersonal violence against refugee women and within refugee communities perpetuated respondents' risk of violence. Women were also harassed by informal individual supporters who expected sexual favours in return for their help. Unco-ordinated local aid provision with the absence of safeguarding measures enabled unscrupulous informal aid workers to harass women to

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exchange sex for aid. For example, upon separation, Shamila remained without the assistance offered to single mothers from local authorities, due to rumours concerning her marital status. As a mother of two and without work she became aid-dependant and faced sexual harassment with 'sex for aid' offers in the informal aid sector:

> '*There is a Turkish man . . . and he has a big store where the food and aid are kept. He is a very rich man that helps Syrians, and we went to ask for his help, and he told me to come and held my hand, and when I asked what he wanted, he said, "Is there sex?*"' (Shamila from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

As recalled above, for many women, the intersections of gendered, religious and racialised oppressions and contested multiple identities produced particular vulnerabilities to intersectional violence from within their own communities and society at large (Sokoloff, 2008). Moreover, violence against survivors increased in refuge, with the gender–culture–religion nexus travelling from country of origin to places of transit and refuge—a phenomenon which I call 'the temporospatial spillover' and 'the structural spillovers' referring to patriarchal norms spreading across borders. Women's narratives recalled a number of spillovers across locations and in different interactions, impeding their access to assistance.

Some married refugee women, who I met in Ankara, described the spillovers of harmful norms between increased domestic violence and threats of honour-related violence. For example, Roqaya, who was previously subjected to increased domestic violence in conflict (Chapter 3), fled to Türkiye with her children and husband, who took advantage of her social isolation in refuge—lack of social connections and kin support and inability to return home. Roqaya, in her 30s from Syria, experienced protracted domestic violence from the early weeks of her marriage, which intensified in conflict and refuge. She sought divorce early on, but her husband refused and committed serious crimes—burning her family house and murdering a judge handling their case. Multiple factors shaped her experience, including her husband's personal history—neglect in childhood and militant activity—intergenerational gender norms, family influence and misuse of religion, though in Roqaya's account he did not practice any religion, and ignored the religious teachings on equity in marriage in which she believed. Her expressions of piety in the presence of her husband triggered physical violence against Roqaya at times, who described how her trust in God prompted his anger and escalated violence:

> '*I told him that finding a house* [in refuge] *is in Allah's hands; if he wants it to be, then it'll be, and he started beating me again, and he scratched my cheeks*' (Roqaya from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

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Without kin support in refuge, Roqaya and several other participants were subjected to persistent domestic violence, being unable to exit exploitative relationships due to court or translation costs related to pursuing divorce. In addition, concerns about losing their children upon separation were the most frequently mentioned barriers to seeking help. In divorce negotiations, women had to fight for custody of their children as fathers wanted to keep the children in exchange for agreeing to a divorce. Some could not access marriage certificates from Syria needed for divorce cases, because they felt at risk of religious persecution and violence if they returned to their country. Therefore, several women remained trapped in domestic violence without support, as in the case of Roqaya:

> '*Problems began the moment I arrived in Türkiye. I have no one here and he used to hit me all the time. Sometimes even the neighbours would come and try to get me off his hands . . . Whenever there was a fight between us, he would take my phone, and lock me in a room to prevent me from communicating with anyone and he would damage my face to make me look bad. He enjoys harming me and he would threaten to pull my teeth out . . . He knew for sure that whatever happens, I will go back to him, so he became more violent because, to return to Syria, I have to go through many checkpoints. I don't have the courage to do that, and he knows that.*' (Roqaya from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

In addition, Roqaya and several other survivors' accounts indicated the vulnerabilities from conflict spillover to refuge settings. For example, Roqaya's mother, communicating remotely from Syria, advised her to remain with her husband to avoid other dangers in a foreign land. After Roqaya spent a month in a secluded shelter for abused women, which didn't permit phone contact, her family advised her to return to her husband, so they could remain in contact with her. Several women felt they could not disclose their suffering to family in Syria as they would require them to return home where there is a high risk of war-related violence.

In Roqaya's case, despite restraining orders and having custody of her children, her husband kept the two young daughters, misinforming them of their mother's death. A police intervention to reunite her with her children was delayed. When re-attempting divorce proceedings in refuge, Roqaya had to confront her husband who aimed to destroy her honour with untruths concerning her chastity and shaming her publicly. Although she was a lawyer herself, Roqaya was barred from practising law in Türkiye. She remained without protection and ESSN support, as her unresolved marital status disqualified her from public aid, leaving her dependent on assistance from informal local aid groups. In Roqaya's story, intersectional temporospatial vulnerabilities accumulated with interactions between factors across contexts. The risks related to religious beliefs moved with her across borders from a country of origin and conflict to refuge, and they

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were compounded due to the lack of work permit and lack of access to public funds. Wider structural factors, such as institutional incapacities, interlocked and mutually shaped her compounded vulnerability and entrapment in an abusive relationship. Religious factors were among the underlying factors, yet other broader factors at community and structural levels strongly contributed to her victimisation. Indeed, other studies suggest intimate-partner violence (IPV) is estimated to increase with the duration of stay of refugees in countries of resettlement due to accumulative factors (Hyman et al., 2006; Gonçalves and Matos, 2016). Conversely, IPV can also decrease in exile as was the case with several women in Türkiye who self-reported that domestic violence reduced upon their arrival in refuge, given the improved living conditions and limited family influence, such as by mothers-in-law.

At the community level, most Levantine respondents in Türkiye were concerned about their reputation in the community and tried to avoid shame. Reporting of violence was considered shameful, so women chose to keep silent to maintain their good name. Those who experienced sexual harassment and lived alone with children did not disclose abuse due to honour and safety concerns for themselves and their families. Faridah, as one such survivor, was offered substantial amounts (up to 5,000 Turkish lira) by a senior official in the local council in exchange for sexual favours. She disclosed:

> '*. . . the women shouldn't accept it and should report it and tell people about it. For example, regarding Muk'htar* [a neighborhood administrator], *I didn't say anything, and maybe other women will have the same experience with him, but if I talk, people will talk about my honour; I'm a single woman, if I talk, I put myself in the spotlight.*' (Faridah from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Additionally, the culture of blaming survivors deterred women from reporting SGBV. Those women who reported VAW to the police said that they were given no effective assistance, and considered them complicit and unhelpful. The divorced Levantine respondents described adverse attitudes to divorcees in their communities. Some said they were suspected of having relationships with other men. Some families questioned widows' intentions in moving to Türkiye and feared that they would bring shame, as in the cases of Shamila (above) and Khadija (below). Honour was commonly raised as a critical gendered value over time and space, from origin to refuge, which women aimed to protect.

Khadija's experience of marrying a Turkish man (earlier described in Chapter 3) became a new risk factor which spilled over from country of refuge to origin. She was deprived of her bridal and marital rights in an unregistered marriage. She only realised at her marriage ceremony that she was being sold when her husband disclosed paying the dowry to an agent arranging their marriage instead of to her. She

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chose to return home to Syria where she faced risks of honour-based violence for the rumours related to her stay in Türkiye with another man:

> '*We are a very strict tribal community. My father said to me "you stained our honour". I mean, I was married, but everyone back home would talk about me that I went to Türkiye as a prostitute and that I came back with lots of money . . .*' (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Due to stigma and lack of family support, Khadija decided to travel back to Türkiye where she became homeless and was recruited into prostitution. Her story and stories of other displaced women show that vulnerabilities accumulated at inter-personal level. For the small number of Levantine women who remained in relationships, war trauma, loss of relatives and belongings and daily socio-economic stressors disrupted gender roles and relations, often increasing tension in the family. Thus, some women spoke about additional inter-personal struggles with their spouses. Stay-at-home mothers were often obliged to seek their husband's permission to leave home, which could incite tensions and disagreements, unlike working women and women without spouses. For instance, Amira, whose story is presented earlier in this chapter, was transnationally and emotionally controlled in her mobility in Türkiye via phone communication with her husband staying in Saudi Arabia, who prevented her from working and threatened her with taking away her children.

> '*One year we didn't meet, you know I was pregnant to cross a border to Türkiye, and then I started a new life. He should have supported me, but he didn't. He always asks me "where are you? What are you doing?*"' (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

In Amira's case, gender-specific mobility restrictions limited her livelihood opportunities despite alterations in gender roles she experienced. She, and many women I interviewed became heads of extended households as a result of war and displacement and associated loss of spouses and changes in marital status.

Women who arrived in Türkiye with their husbands expected from them provision and protection. However, men often struggled with unemployment and social exclusion and failed to meet expectations from their wives which led to several marriage break ups. For example, Sara from Syria, in her 20s, was one of the divorced survivors who felt that her former husband was not concerned about her protection and required her to seek aid instead of him undertaking work:

> '*. . . we got separated because he doesn't want to work . . . He wanted me to go to charities to receive aid . . . He is not providing for me . . . not protecting me . . . and he knows that nobody will give things for free* [helpers may expect favours from women] . . .' (Sara from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

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Widows and divorcees had to adopt new strategies for survival. Often becoming a breadwinner in their households, they confronted additional risks to VAW while seeking residence permits, aid and work. Especially, carers with dependents (children, parents, parents-in-law), some with post-war disabilities, had to take additional risks to meet the increasing practical needs of their families in places of refuge.

Conclusion: Fluid religious influences on vulnerability

This chapter sought to meet the first objective of this book by showing how religion intersected with other factors to influence the vulnerability of women to violence in displacement. It is fair to conclude that temporospatial and variable intersectional vulnerabilities accumulated at different levels of social ecology and stages of displacement with interactions between factors across contexts in ways that exacerbated gender inequalities and increased women's vulnerability to VAW. The quadruple crisis of development, humanitarianism, conflict and migration created an environment in which intersectional factors, including those associated with inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, migrant status and religion, increased women's vulnerability.

The accumulation of these vulnerabilities across migrant journeys, including the external and internal influences of religion, shaped respondents' VAW experiences. Religion's nature is fluid, at times dominant and driving, but also at times a passive factor in contributing and shaping vulnerability. It rarely manifested itself as a stand-alone factor but worked together with other factors, such as racial prejudice, destitution and armed conflict. The temporary intersections of VAW vulnerabilities often spilled over across settings and recurred in repeated and reverse sequences of displacement with accumulative effects, reaffirming the concept of the spiral continuum of violence (Chapter 3 this volume). For example, multiple transits, returns to country of origin and crisis settings, and multiple reentry to countries of conflict and refuge exacerbated vulnerability and exposure to VAW. State violence and structural inequalities experienced in war, transit and refuge restricted migrants' rights and mobility, directly and indirectly contributing to accumulative gendered harm.

The temporal intersections of inequalities and identities occur across women's lives forming multidimensional and complex lived experiences of violence embedded in each individual's context and meaning. For many survivors, religion operated as a fluid intersectional factor at some stage of forced migration over place and time in precarious displacement situations. As argued throughout the chapter, religion influenced the spiral continuum of violence with external and internal influences. Religious constructs continued to influence socioecological conditions shaping vulnerability to VAW throughout displacement.

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External influences operated outside of religion, as factors associated with religious identity which in minority and conflict situations operated as a compounding factor, especially when entangled with geo-political context and power. In Syrian and Iraqi conflict settings, Sunni identity and so being related to 'embodying the enemy', exposed these women to persecution. Different factions of militia targeted them for their perceived religious identity and external appearance as supposed Sunni or Daesh-affiliated subjects, being required to adapt their religious attire in different locations. Upon arrival in refuge, for Levantine survivors in Türkiye, their religion was the same as of the majority, and therefore was not raised as an external factor. However, they encountered discrimination and abuse due to their refugee status, ethnicity and nationality. Structural inequalities and practical barriers prevented and delayed exiting abusive relationships, especially economic deprivation and insufficient legal aid. Conversely, Sub-Saharan respondents experienced heightened religious discrimination in the workplace, as well as broader forms of structural violence, where their racialised appearance often led others to conflate their religious identity with racial identity. Many experienced mistreatments due to what I call an 'amalgamated racialised religious' discrimination. Internal influences run inside religion, as factors associated with religious beliefs and understandings. The gender–culture–religion nexus influenced women's experiences of domestic violence from a country of origin to refuge. In particular, women's religious piety, among almost half of IPV survivors, contributed to prompting their husband's abuse who used religious beliefs to justify their behaviours, besides other factors such as harmful masculinities exacerbated in conflict, which emphasises the significance of intersectional and socioecological analysis to identify diverse risk factors to inform integrated interventions.

Concluding, external and internal religious influences shaped VAW experiences to varied degrees at some stage of forced migration among all respondents in Türkiye and Tunisia. Religious influences combined with individual, community and structural factors pervading and driving compounded vulnerabilities of displaced women, which were related to their social identity markers—for instance, race, migrant status, gender, age and religion. While religion operated as an intersecting risk factor, it also operated as a protective factor and contributed to building resilience and coping mechanisms, which are examined in the next chapter.

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5
Resourcing resilience
Adaptive religious coping

'On our way to Türkiye, people were smuggling Mazut (fuel oil) and the warplanes carried out airstrikes . . . at that point I thought that I might not survive . . . I prayed to God that I make it and I did, thank God.'
(Mariam, in her 60s, originally from Syria, then in Ankara, Turkey)

Introduction

This chapter contributes to the book's second objective by exploring how religion shapes the resilience and coping of women with violence and displacement. Drawing on an integrated intersectional and socioecological framework, introduced in Chapter 2, I discuss how displaced survivors preserve and use religious resources to cope with extreme adversity. In doing so, I challenge portrayals of refugee women as helpless victims.

I centre on the voices of thirty-eight displaced Levantine and African women, both Christian and Muslim, interviewed in Türkiye and Tunisia in 2019. Survey results presented in Appendix 5–9 complement the analysis. Most respondents practised their religion prior to displacement, although religiosity was not a recruitment criterion. I asked the participants about their displacement experiences, resilience, religious resources, coping and wellbeing. A customised survey combined the three scales: brief religious coping, 'Brief RCOPE' (Pargament et al., 2011), psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002) and Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996), and also captured socio-demographic background.[1]

I also draw on wider evidence on religion as a central coping resource in traumatic circumstances identified by numerous studies alongside culture, motherhood, education and community support. However, the chapter offers original evidence on gender-specific patterns of religious coping, and argues that religion, as a primary resilience resource and coping mechanism, is part of the spiral

[1] For full methodological details, see Chapter 1.

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continuum of violence (see Chapter 3). From a sociological perspective, this discussion applies a hybrid definition of religion which combines its substantive and functional definitions—respectively exploring what religion is, such as beliefs in theistic and non-theistic realities and what religion does, i.e. the effects of religion in people's lives (Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). The analysis seeks to identify the subjective meaning women attach to their lived experiences of religion, including their religious truths. Accordingly, I do not engage in theological exegesis or challenge women's interpretations; rather, I focus on lived religion and lived theology as they are shared in their accounts.

First, I outline religious resources women preserved across displacement and introduce the term Conservation of Religious Resources (CORR) to show how these are actively mobilised across displacement. I adapt Hobfoll's (1989) concept of Conservation of Resources (COR) which is a useful resource-based theory of stress, predicting that resource loss is the main element in stress processes. The central tenet of COR theory is that in stressful situations '*individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value*' and that '*individuals' resources are threatened with loss* [or] *. . . are actually lost*' (Hobfoll, 2001:341).

Second, I propose the idea of 'adaptive religious coping', by drawing on the concept of religious coping (Pargament et al., 1990). Religious coping refers to handling stress with the help of spirituality and a religious framework to find meaning, comfort and support and to help others (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2011). There are positive and negative religious coping mechanisms (hereafter respectively PRC and NRC) that impact mental health outcomes. By adaptive religious coping I refer to a mechanism whereby women adjust their coping with violence and displacement by applying their religious resources, such as prayers, to deal with close-to-death experiences and to get through day-to-day life.

Used together, CORR and adaptive religious coping explain how survivors adjust cognitive (meaning making), behavioural (practices, help seeking) and emotional/spiritual (soothing) responses to shifting risks. I turn to these theories because they are practical, flexible across contexts and widely used to make sense of how people cope with stress and hardship. Some limitations of adopting them to frame my analysis include risk of oversimplifying religious life into 'resources', reducing sacred experiences to functions and so overlooking the substance and transcendent value of religion. Both theories focus primarily on the individual and do not automatically account for structural violence, legal precarity or host-state policies that shape displaced women's coping options. Further details on theories used are presented in Chapter 2. As with earlier chapters, this chapter contains sensitive material that some readers may find distressing, so self-care is encouraged.

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Coping overview

Women spoke about different facets of their resilience resources and how these were used for coping. They reported that their experiences of VAW and forced migration strengthened them, as well as their faith. Many relied on their faith, inner strength, personal development and ability to adapt. For example, mothers mobilised strength based on their motivation to secure a better future for themselves and their children. For that, many women underwent transformation of their gender roles, some due to the loss or absence of a spouse but also at times because of alterations in gender relations in displacement:

> *'My children push me to continue in my life. I try to find different solutions every day … I look and think about what they need, what they will be in future … I work on myself for them … if I stayed the same as he* [her husband] *left me, I would be lost here.'* (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Experiences of displacement and VAW fortified many respondents. Being subject to violence at different points of their lives was reported to have led them to develop qualities such as perseverance, inner strength and patience. Women strove to succeed against the odds. Working respondents said work was a practical coping strategy, wherein they distracted themselves from intrusive thoughts and negative feelings, and some acquired new social and vocational skills to make a living. Those in Türkiye said learning a local language helped them to cope. This option was unavailable for those in Tunisia as no language classes were provided to migrants. Many drew strength from mindfulness of their situation and reflecting on the fragile conditions of their compatriots:

> *'… I live in a dilapidated house but when I sit and think and see that Syrians in Syria live in tents and face bombardment, and some of them died of the cold … I say Alhamdulillah* [thanks be to God] *… my situation is better than others.'* (Hamida from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Women, as Hamida above, frequently used religious language, references and narratives to describe their predicament, indicating the importance of religious resources in their experiences, as discussed next. This chapter focuses on lived religion (combining what religion is and what religious does) because many displaced women centred on its crucial role in their coping mechanisms. Therefore, interventions might build on these strengths by integrating psychosocial support with culturally and spiritually sensitive approaches.

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Religious resources

All but two women practised their religion and all but one stated that they believed in God and religion was important in their life (Appendix 5). Participants most frequently reported having access to personal religious resources in displacement such as prayers and devotion, with the majority praying daily. Levantine women, self-identified as Sunni, frequently referred to memorised Qur'an and *hadiths*.[2] African migrants represented different Christian churches and varied in the extent to which they referenced religious scripts during interviews. Communal religious resources, such as visiting places of worship, communal prayers and faith-based welfare, were less commonly reported than personal resources.

The primary religious resource of women I interviewed was their prayer. The majority (n=34) prayed every day; almost all Muslim respondents maintained their daily five prayers, while all Christian respondents commonly prayed in the morning and evening. Muslim respondents also relied on additional optional prayers for support, *duas* (supplications), *tasbeeh* (beads prayer) and *dhikr* (a ritual litany of glorifying God).

The secondary religious resource in exile was the religious scripture. Around two thirds of women read the Qur'an (n=18) or the Bible (n=5) daily (sixteen Levantine and seven African respondents), six women weekly, one monthly, and a quarter never read a religious text (five Muslim, three Christian). Women's levels of literacy and access to religious texts with translations often affected their ability to read a religious text. The majority of African Christian respondents read the Bible less than pre-displacement, only having it available via phone applications, while all Muslim African and some Levantine respondents faced difficulties reading the Qur'an at home due to language barriers or illiteracy. Illiterate women relied on translations and listening to recordings of the scriptures or on memorised passages, and some relied on touching the words from the Qur'an, repeating '*bismilah*' (in the name of God) on each of these words to substitute their reading. Some listened to the script instead, using phone applications. The situation was different for the Levantine respondents who were divided into two halves: those who read the Qur'an more than before displacement and those who read the Qur'an less in refuge due to daily stressors, such as illness and economic uncertainty. Throughout their daily activities, some women from both faiths said they continued to think about sacred texts in their minds:

> *'In Saudi Arabia I read the Qur'an every day. Here* [Türkiye] *I do not, not like before . . . but I always come back and read it. I even opened the Qur'an and read it in my mind . . . when I wash dishes, work in the kitchen or the house . . .* ' (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

[2] Narrations of the Prophet Muhammed recognised as an Islamic religious source.

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Respondents who used to fast at origin and those who started fasting in refuge recalled reliance on this practice as means of pleading and getting closer to God. For the majority (of both faiths), fasting increased, with the exceptions being pregnant women and those with small children. A third of women (ten Muslim and three Christian) were fasting weekly, half were fasting yearly (sixteen Muslim and three Christian), several monthly, and only a couple of women never fasted. Muslim women fasted yearly in Ramadan and some weekly for the *Sunnah*—following the tradition of Prophet Muhammed who fasted every Monday and Thursday—and Christians fasted usually from 6am to 6pm. During fasting, respondents would intensify their prayers and reading of religious texts. There were no reports of fasting in transit, except from enforced starvation, mentioned in Chapter 4.

Overall, Muslim survivors rarely mentioned religious institutions or by custom were not connected to a mosque. Christian respondents lost connection to their churches. More than half respondents (ten Levantine and ten African) had never attended a mosque or church in their places of refuge, seven did so every few months, four Levantine and three African Muslim respondents attended a mosque weekly and four Levantine respondents monthly. Some occasionally attended *tajweed* classes to practice Qur'an recitation in Ankara. In Southern Tunisia, access to Christian religious services was restricted with the closest church from one denomination located 100 km away in Djerba. Christian respondents, as a religious minority, struggled to access places of worship in remote locations with only three attending a church every few months, and African Muslims lacked access to scripture in their mother tongue.

In terms of communal resources, pre-migration, several Christian respondents would seek advice from their pastors and relied on communal donations for living expenses, and two Levantine respondents consulted with their imams. The majority of participants in Türkiye received some aid from local faith communities, either as religious donations (for example, *sadaqa* and *zakat* for orphaned children and widows especially during Ramadan) or material support (such as furniture). However, some who reached out to local imams for material help did not receive support but instead were sexually harassed. Levantine women in Türkiye also interacted with trusted female members of refugee communities, visiting each other at their homes, reading the Qur'an and celebrating religious festivals together. Some prayed occasionally in smaller groups with family, friends and neighbours. Many relied on their morning and evening supplications by phone applications, and those equipped with TV watched religious channels.

Furthermore, several African participants in Tunisia, regardless of their faith, received some support from local communities (for instance, food parcels during Ramadan). Some used technology and communal prayers on social media, depending on access to mobile data. A third of Christian women living outside of shelters met with friends in their friends' homes, including for religious activities, such as singing and online prayers.

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Conserving religious resources in displacement

Substantive research indicates displaced women survivors frequently rely on God and their faith (for instance, Tankink and Richters, 2007; Strang et al., 2020) and non-migration contexts (e.g. Smith and Kelly, 2001; Ahrens et al., 2010). However, no research has been done on conservation of religious resources with displaced survivors. Women I interviewed in Türkiye and Tunisia deployed their own known and available ways of coping, turning to religious coping as a comfortable, well-known strategy (Carver et al., 1989). Arguably they did so because there was no other available solution in displacement conditions, and religious resources resided within them.

Overall, many women's narratives highlighted simultaneous strengthening of faith and inner-self to varying degrees (twenty-nine reporting 'a great deal') and most respondents tried to understand how God might be trying to strengthen them through their experiences (thirty-three responding 'a big deal', Appendix 6). Several Levantine survivors of domestic violence and divorcees said their experiences led them to become stronger and rely on their religion which in turn made them feel stronger. In the words of Roqaya, whose story is discussed in Chapter 4, her experience of VAW strengthened her and increased her reliance on God:

> '*That experience* [of protracted domestic violence] *made me stronger and made me realize that I shouldn't think that my father or brother would protect me; that's wrong. We should depend and put our trust in God only. Nobody can help me except Him.*' (Roqaya from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Religious coping and personal strength-based coping interacted and mutually reinforced women's resilience and overall capacity to cope. Hanifah, a widowed survivor of domestic violence from Syria, persevered with divine connection:

> '*. . . humans by their nature, they always work to survive, and I don't give up, I like confronting adversity and being strong . . . I always ask God for help, and I get help.*' (Hanifah from Syria, 50s, Ankara)

Combining religious and personal strength-based coping was an expression of women's agency in the context of absence of control over economic resources and decision-making in their refugee journeys. For many participants, the structural conditions exacerbating gender inequalities, such as irregularity and messiness of migration, put them in situations in which they lacked power and control. One woman separated from her husband during her journey, and subjected to rape by smugglers, said:

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> *'I have two children in my country, and I don't know where they are. My husband is far away from me. I have no control over my life.'* (Sumaya from Ivory Coast, 30s, Medenine)

In addition, continued exposure to abuse hindered their agency, including among those trapped in exploitative relationships. Therefore, most respondents found themselves in situations out of their control and trusted a supreme power, which they believed controlled their affairs, to change their circumstances. They sought opportunities to connect with this power and relinquish their lack of control into a relationship over which they had full control (with the divine).

Therefore, I argue that displaced women's turning to God was an agential act of seeking control in order to better their conditions in the absence of having power of their own, and sometimes occurred alongside other actions such as seeking work. Within the combined religious and personal strength-based coping, reliance on God in decision-making was a common tactic. Respondents reported combining self-reliance with reliance on God in both decision-making and implementation of decisions by integrating emotion-focused and action-focused religious activities (see Figure 5.1). Some women who described themselves as exhausted passed over control to God completely.

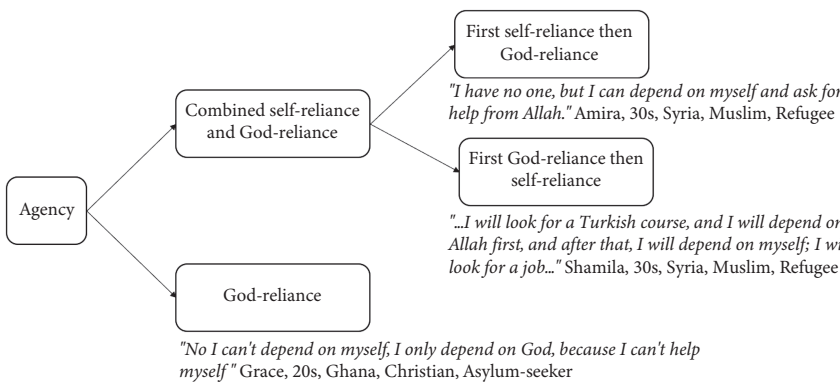


Figure 5.1 Agency combining self-reliance and God-reliance (Author's own elaboration)

Losses and gains of religious resources

Drawing on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), I argue that survivors lost, gained and adapted religious resources depending on the external disruptions and access to religious accessories and activities in displacement, as illustrated throughout this chapter. COR theory delineates that in stressful situations when people lose resources they 'apply resource conservation strategies', i.e. they make use of resources accessible to them in order to adjust to new circumstances (ibid). In summary, effective adaptation generates new resources (Hobfoll, 2001). In this

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Table 5.1 Total reported gain and loss of religious resources in refuge*

Respondents	Gain	Loss	No change
Levantine	14	4	5
Sub-Saharan	5	8	2
Total	19	12	7
Muslim	16	6	5
Christian	3	6	2
Total	19	12	7

*Compiled based on religious resources reported by respondents in qualitative and quantitative instruments

study, displaced women used and adapted their religious resources in their precarious circumstances to enable coping. Across different stages of forced migration, the survey and interview data indicate that more than half (most Muslim and a few Christian respondents) gained and around one-third of all respondents (most Christian and a few Muslim) lost religious resources used for coping with traumatic experiences (as compiled in Table 5.1) due to varying factors problematised below. Gains in personal religious resources often referred to prayers, supplications, reading a script and fasting, notably aspects that respondents had control over to uphold their faith. Loss of a major communal resource, such as prayers in a place of worship (acute among religious minorities), affected loss in other communal religious resources, such as religious study groups and pastoral care.

Different factors affected respondents' losses and gains of religious resources. First, during changing contextual circumstances of migratory pathways, the majority of respondents were restricted from using communal resources, but they mobilised various resources from within their spiritual capital. In Türkiye, the Levantine respondents sharing religion with the host society could practise their religion without fear of discrimination. Nonetheless many relied on individual religious resources and practices, partly because of customs of praying at home but also some avoided religious institutions after inter-sectarian persecutions in Syria. Thus, only a few Muslim women visited a mosque in both countries—six weekly, four monthly, five every few months (Table 5.1). In Southern Tunisia, access to Christian religious services was restricted with the closest church of one denomination located 100 km away in Djerba. Thus, Christian respondents, as a religious minority, struggled to access places of worship in remote locations with only three women visiting a place of worship every few months. Meanwhile, African Muslims lacked access to scripture in their mother tongue.

Several women said '*faith is always changing*' indicating that the internal processes of preserving religious resources were dynamic and often shaped by what

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I term '*shifting faith*'. Near-death experiences in displacement, protracted exposure to IPV and non-partner sexual violence led most respondents to affirm and strengthen their faith (twenty-nine women responding 'a big deal' to question whether traumatic events led her to a 'stronger religious faith', Appendix 8). Two respondents reported no change, one reported a decline, and several others described spiritual struggles which can be broadly defined as distress caused by religious beliefs. *Shifting faith* involved temporary and fluid inner reconnection and disconnection with the divine under the influence of external stressors and spiritual capital, as illustrated in Figure 5.2.

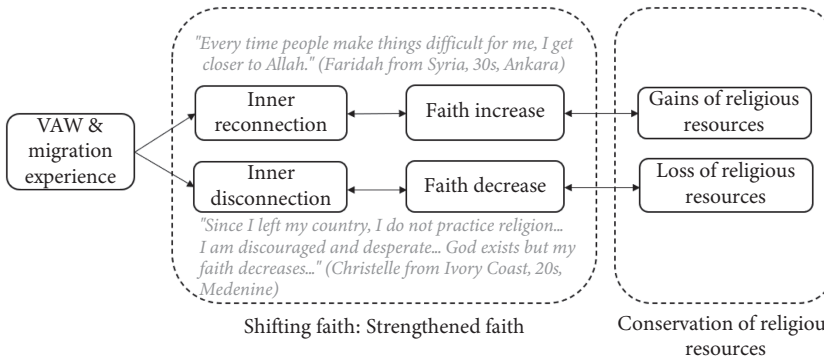


Figure 5.2 The process of conserving religious resources (Author's own elaboration)

Reconnection was associated with an increase of faith, and disconnection with a decrease. Shifting faith reinforced or hindered the conservations of religious resources: an increase in faith commonly led to gains (for instance, more prayers) and adaptation of religious resources, while a decrease led to their loss, as it weakened several women's faith and reduced their religious activity. Older respondents in both countries reported a continued, regular and intense worship routine despite changing circumstances. In summary, women's *shifting faith* influenced their pool of personal religious resources, while daily stressors, VAW experience and evolving stages of forced migration curtailed their access to communal and material religious resources which they often replaced with alternatives, primarily drawing upon their spiritual capital—personal religious resources—as demonstrated in the next section.

Adaptive religious coping strategies

In this section, I explore religious resources that women relied on in displacement and consider their functions in enabling their coping processes. I draw upon

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Ter Haar's (2011) classification of religious resources—religious ideas, practices and experiences—and definition of spiritual capital as '*people's ability to access resources believed to reside in an invisible world, which can be mobilised for the common good . . .*' (ibid:20). Here, I introduce the concept of 'adaptive religious coping' which refers to a mechanism whereby survivors adapt their religious coping behaviours to the context of displacement. Survivors' religious resources had distinct and combined functions, and corresponding coping strategies, related to their mind, body and spirit, respectively enabling their cognitive, behavioural and emotional/spiritual strategies (as presented in Figure 5.3). The reliance on religious beliefs, religious practices and spiritual experiences combined in generating survivors' resilience capacities. This section extends religious coping theory.

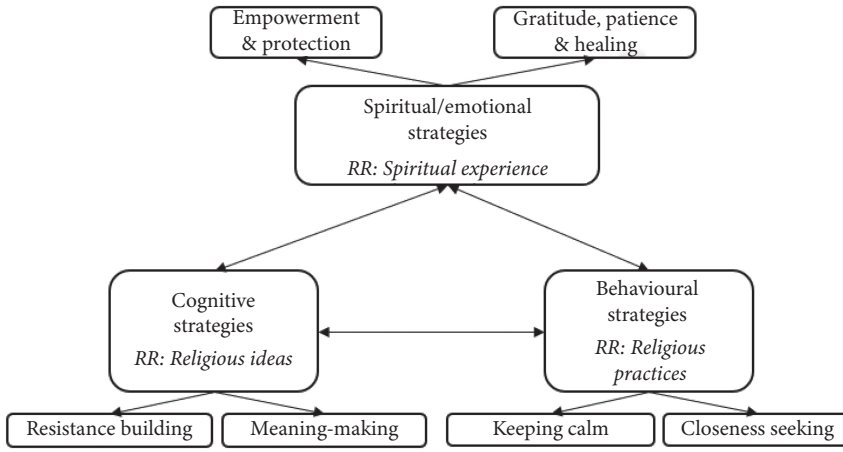


Figure 5.3 Adaptive religious coping strategies (RR: religious resources) (Author's own elaboration)

Cognitive adaptive religious coping

Women used religious resources to generate coping strategies based on cognitive engagement. Particularly, religious ideas enabled them to use religious coping strategies by 'thinking'—finding meaning, reappraisal and reconciliation of their past, while building resistance to VAW. This type of cognitive religious coping offers believers a sacred framework for finding meaning in their lives (Pargament, 1997). Women's religious ideas in this study mainly derived from the sacred texts, theology, reflections and personal religious experiences, and their religious education mainly from home, schools, places of worship and self-studies pre-migration.

Religious coping of displaced women relied on the central tenets of monotheistic religions—Islam and Christianity—such as belief in God. A religious

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orientation in their thinking framework reflected that these women entrusted their lives to a 'merciful and forgiving' God, believed in the afterlife and a divine power to transform their lives. Muslims and Christians spoke about God, some respectively mentioning their monotheistic prophets in their narratives. Most women glorified their 'most beneficent' God throughout their interviews.

First and foremost, for many respondents, their religious beliefs helped them to explain their experiences, providing them with cognitive coherence through which they made sense of their unspeakable hardship. Most women centralised God's role in saving them from their predicaments and believed in destiny. On her way to Europe through Libya, Grace was subjected to multiple violations. Moving through the desert she witnessed many people dying because of dehydration and starvation. She recalled:

> *'I believe in destiny, I can't say that a human being brought me to Tunisia, it is the will of God . . . Many souls died, I have my child. So, I thank God.'* (Grace from Ghana, 20s, Medenine)

Nearly all Muslim respondents and over half of Christian respondents (in total thirty women) believed that what happened to them was part of a test to deepen their beliefs. Their religious orientation reminded them about temporality and inevitable death which would end their suffering. They drew strength from the promise of the Day of Judgement and reward thereafter:

> *'Religion is everything in my life; it's what's keeping me going, it strengthens me because I know that in the end, there's the Day of Judgment, and we always hope that God will open doors for us . . .'* (Amina from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

However, for many, a primary concern was their current condition and their ability to live in dignity. Thus, many survivors believed that God provided for them and routinely conveyed that nobody helped them but God, attributing any help received to a godly act, and relying solely on God's mercy. Christian respondents commonly trusted that God would send a helper to support them, while Muslims hoped God would create new opportunities for them. Concurrently, some Levantine respondents believed that helping others would ease their difficulties, with at least three respondents experiencing a sense of relief after doing charity.

Religious beliefs helped women to reconcile their past. Respondents of both faiths took the religious scripts as powerful tools of guidance and hope for rebuilding their lives. Several respondents believed their hardship and 'tests' to have already been described in the sacred texts, so they used them or wanted (where inaccessible) to learn from these stories. They interpreted that before achieving their goals they needed to endure uncertainty. For one survivor of severe sexual

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exploitation in Libya, now based in Tunisia, a biblical narrative of migration and glory enabled her to understand why she had experienced sexual violence:

> '*… I always ask for God's help, for God's forgiveness … We cannot find glory like the children of Israel … to find glory, you have to pass through the darkness.*' (Gloria from DRC, 30s, Zarzis)

As above, the majority of African respondents found explanations for their unsuccessful journeys and attributed their survival and reaching Tunisia on foot (from Libya) to a godly act. Those who looked death in the eye reappraised and appreciated their life more than before. Similarly, Levantine respondents perceived their displacement as an act of God, pre-defined in the Qur'an. Believing that, regardless of what happens, God is sufficient to them, assisted respondents who had lost belongings, relatives and children. For instance, Jameela who had lost a daughter in a tragic incident and a husband in war in Syria used a Qur'anic verse to remind herself to redefine the death of her family:

> '*When I think of my husband and daughter, maybe every day, I cry for two hours before I sleep, but then I remember the verse in the Qur'an: "And perhaps you dislike a thing and God makes therein much good.*"' (Jameela from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Meaning-making from their faith frequently allowed survivors to positively reappraise their stressors, accept hardship and help them look on the bright side. For instance, several interviewees considered that their adversity and prayers prevented a bigger adversity from happening. Nonetheless, many women lost access to sacred texts and were unable to reappraise negative events which often led to spiritual struggles.

Mainly African respondents spoke about losing faith and questioning God at times for their suffering and adversity. They experienced spiritual struggles which related to their negative religious coping, for example thinking they were punished and abandoned by God. The Levantine respondents reported some spiritual struggles in the survey, but not during interviews. For instance, in religious coping scale used (Brief RCOPE, see results in Appendix 6) the means were higher for Muslim women in 'feeling punished by God' than Christians who talked about punishment from God in the interviews and Muslims were more likely to question why they were punished. Conversely, a third of all respondents wondered to varying degrees whether God and their church/mosque had abandoned them, with Christian respondents, as religious minorities, scoring higher in 'feeling abandoned' by God and religious congregations. Unable to resolve their spiritual struggles without external support, some African respondents turned to negative religious coping, for instance, questioning God's power (in the B-RCOPE scale). On average they scored higher than Levantine respondents, but they questioned God only in

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'the moment of weakness', and regained faith shortly afterwards. For instance, during sexual exploitation in Libya at times women questioned whether God existed and why they were suffering, while they continued to plead to God for help, having trust He would respond to their calls. Kanika was one of the respondents whose asylum claim was rejected and questioned her fate:

> *'Since I am hopeless I have nobody to help me, I leave everything to God to bring a helper for me … God will send somebody to rescue … when I was in Nigeria … every day I fasted and went to church but since I entered this route* [towards Europe] *… In Tunisia, I hoped God would help me to get documents* [asylum]*, and the documents came negative … Every day I ask God, though I know the questions are not good, … "why did you abandon me?" … "why have you left me to suffer like this?" … '* (Kanika from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

Some Christian respondents and one Muslim timidly questioned God about their hardship, while a minority blamed themselves for their suffering and for embarking on their journeys. For example, Melanie, a woman in her 30s from Cameroon, fled her country to escape a forced marriage and was later detained and sexually abused in Libya on her way to Europe. She struggled to believe that God could impose on anybody such a difficult test, and instead she blamed herself for rejecting an arranged marriage and falling in love with another man, with whom she fled. Taking responsibility for changing her situation, she sought forgiveness, believing it was granted when God helped her leave Libya:

> *'God cannot put his children through such a test … I put myself in this situation because I don't want this problem* [forced marriage] *… It's me, not God … I blame myself … I ask God, 'Please, if I make a mistake, you have to forgive me' … I believe he has forgiven me … God did miracles for me. God brought different power for me … I left the situation in Libya … God … gave me many things … including an opportunity to change my situation.'* (Melanie from Cameroon, 30s, Medenine)

A lack of sufficient pastoral support in Tunisia for religious minorities affected the African respondents' emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Conversely, many Levantine respondents relied on spiritual self-reliance due to fears of sectarian persecution and distrust of religious institutions perceived as involved in the conflict. While several Christian respondents longed to visit their churches and for pastoral care, Muslim respondents in Tunisia wished to gain advice on how to improve their prayers or read the Qur'an in their mother tongue, as they did not speak Arabic. Women who were unable to pray regularly felt guilty, which subsequently increased their distress:

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'*There is no excuse for not praying…I do not pray and I am not ok with that because my mind is not at peace and there is no excuse for* [missing] *prayers.*' (Naila from Guinea, 30s, Medenine)

For some survivors, a lack of support for their religious needs generated emotional and spiritual suffering, as interventions were said to overlook their coping mechanism. Orisa from Nigeria, in her 30s, was one such participant who experienced a loss of religious resources in migration. At home she would attend study groups at her church three times a week, but during migration she found no church. At times she questioned God for her fate in transit and forced prostitution and felt abandoned, yet her survival of sexual exploitation and forced migrant journey strengthened her faith. Back home she would read the Bible or prayer books regularly, but lost access to these in her displacement, although she continued to pray with her sister and celebrate religious holidays. She relied on her inner prayers and online faith groups for worship activities and was not able to contact a religious leader for advice in Tunisia, even though she would consult a pastor at home before she migrated.

Amid unspeakable hardship and lack of support, many women described religious resources as their only strength against abusive husbands and to cope with perilous journeys. Religious beliefs, religious knowledge and lived experience enabled women to appropriate patriarchal religious interpretations. Literate women from Syria found religious means to resist VAW by using references to their faith and egalitarian religious interpretations to challenge patriarchy. Levantine survivors of IPV, in turn, focused on reinterpreting the contentious Qur'anic verses, contesting male interpretations of the Qur'an as implying women's subordination. They resisted submissiveness of women and challenged abuse by reverting to their own reading of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition, wherein they found the sacred value of women and meanings condemning violence against them.

'*There is no justification for violence against women in the religion. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said 'Take my advice with regard to women: Act kindly'. But we understand religion according to what we want.*' (Mona from Syria, 50s, Ankara)

Engaging with and rediscovering religious teachings and scriptures empowered survivors to resist and endure abuse and imagine for themselves and their spouses a non-violent life in honourable relationships in line with their beliefs:

'*No! In religion, God forbade hitting and hitting the face. In religion it is either honourably retain them* [wives] *or honourably part with them. But people nowadays are away from religion.*' (Alif from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

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Many survivors of domestic violence also recognised their God-given freedom to make independent choices, the impermissibility of violence and the importance of protecting life from mistreatment by their spouses and relatives. However, they were constrained from leaving abusive spouses by the lack of legal aid and material support. Some respondents who married early ascribed their early marriage to tradition which was incompatible with their religion. For example, Basma and several other respondents from Syria who married before fifteen argued that there is no religious case for child marriage.

> *'It* [early marriage] *is not allowed. Our religion doesn't say to marry the girl when she's young. This is ignorance and has no relation to religion.'* (Basma from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Women who felt sufficiently literate in their religious education challenged men's ability within the wider community to correctly interpret religion. They found men unfair in their interpretations and unwilling to search for meanings of the scriptures, taking the wording literally without knowledge. In particular, survivors challenged the contentious verse 4:34 which was used by some men in their lives out of context to reinforce patriarchal social norms.

Faridah, a mother of five from Syria in her 30s, used her religious knowledge to resist the patriarchal interpretations she heard from her abusive husband. She had endured severe abuse and contested polygamy by using the Qur'anic lens to advocate that a man can only marry one wife to ensure fairness:

> *'My husband always told me that it is his right to get one, two, three or four wives, and that's written in the Qur'an, but he didn't complete the Ayah that you can't be fair with multiple wives even if you tried.' If you want to say, 'Alrrijalu Qawwamoona Aala Alnnisai'* [men are in charge of women] *then that's also not a justification for men* [to feel more superior than a woman] *because the Ayah means that men are braver than women, they can go out to work and provide for their families. This is the meaning of the Ayah; it doesn't mean that they have the right to beat us.'* (Faridah from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Drawing upon the Prophetic traditions, religious survivors, such as Faridah, contested patriarchal interpretations of some religious verses and did not equate men's responsibility for women's protection and maintenance with control. She also relied on religious teachings that acclaim women's status and referred to a popular hadith which Muslims often use to evidence women's elevated position, whereby mothers should be treated three times as kindly, before a father is considered. Such hadiths also served as important cognitive resources for other women to validate their value and potential as important agents in

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their family. Moreover, the influence of religious beliefs built women's resistance to sexual violence by non-partners. In Faridah's case, she rejected a substantial monetary offer (several thousand Turkish lira) in exchange for sexual relations, while applying for her residence in the *mukhtar's* office (head of local administration in Ankara), on religious grounds. She hoped that she would be rewarded with paradise for her piety and rejected the offer multiple times, relying on a promise of reward which she cited through the following *hadith*:

> *'There are seven whom God will shade in His shade on the Day when there is no shade except His shade: . . . a man* [woman] *who is called by a woman* [man] *of beauty and position (for illegal intercourse), but he says: "I fear God" . . . "* (Faridah from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

However, piety could also trigger domestic violence against women respondents, as illustrated in Chapter 4. Several survivors, drawing upon their religious knowledge, reminded their abusive non-practicing husbands about the Prophetic advice of how to treat women. Shukri, 40s, a divorcee living in Ankara, was one such survivor. She was separated from her two children following a custody judgement and was subjected to severe domestic violence, partly due to her religiosity. Her husband did not practice any religion and asked her to stop wearing a headscarf. She used the Qur'an as a timekeeper of her divorce, requesting God that by the time she finishes reading the entire script, she would be already divorced. She drew strength to seek divorce from her faith and inner strength. Shukri compared her divorce to, and drew strength from, one of the Qur'anic chapters:

> *'I read the Qur'an a lot, and patience, I had no doubt that I would be strong enough to leave my husband. Sometimes, I see my divorce like Surah* [chapter] *Youssef; it started with a dream, a vision, and ended with reality.*' (Shukri from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Moreover, pious companions in some cases acted as important allies in reminding victims of their rights and, for instance, supported survivors hesitant of divorce in filing cases against their abusive husbands. They drew on the religious concept of '*haram*'—prohibited acts—to protect women's safety and interests. This was the case with Shukri who was supported by her friends. This dynamic resonates with Mahmood's (2005) conceptualisation of agency, which moves beyond liberal notions of resistance to encompass the capacity to inhabit and enact norms within specific moral and religious frameworks. In these cases, pious companions exercised agency not by rejecting tradition but by mobilising religious principles.

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Behavioural adaptive religious coping

In this section I refer to women's adapted religious behaviours and rituals wherein they actively engaged with their bodies. The 'doing' of religious activities kept women calm and drew them closer to God, helping them to deal with stress and providing a lifeline to the divine. Behavioural engagement in religious activities supported women's mental health and wellbeing.

For the majority, prayer was an integral part of their lives and often the only available tool to help keep calm and combat their situations. At different stages of migrant journeys, survivors drew strength and respite from their invocations, seeking their and their children's protection, survival, material provision and ability to reach final destinations amid hopelessness and exhaustion. Respondents engaged in prayers before setting out on their journeys, some involving a recitation from the Qur'an for protection and some would pray the entire journey until their arrival, having complete trust in God:

> '*We walked for hours and read* [Qur'anic verses]*: 'We have set a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and, We have covered them so that they do not see . . . "* (Halima from Sudan, 30s, Medenine)

> '*I am telling you, if you send prayers upon the Prophet, that will make everything easier for you, it could make long journeys shorter and easier.*' (Hala from Syria, 50s, Ankara)

Safety on a journey was the key wish for respondents, some using scriptural verses for reassurance in God's words and sending blessings for the Prophet. In life-threatening situations during forced migration journeys, respondents intensified their prayers, asking for help and divine protection from further harm. During difficult journeys some women used a range of favourite passages of religious scriptures and recited memorised prayers from the Prophet to escalate their requests for safety. For example, Basma from Syria recalled a prayer:

> '*. . . and there's specific dua* [prayer] *that I like, it's when our Prophet Younus was trapped in the whale, he used to say, 'No-one has the right to be worshipped except You. How perfect You are, verily I was among the wrong-doers.' This dua helps me so much.*' (Basma from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

However, the frequency of women's prayers fluctuated along forced migrant routes. On the journey, intimate prayers for protection, survival and betterment of their situations, kept women going. However, the daily stressors in places of refuge, for example inadequate accommodation and psychological distress, often distracted survivors from maintaining their regular prayers:

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'*I am always moving from one place to the other and that makes me distracted. Honestly, I sometimes feel that I pray less than before in Syria.*' (Roqaya from Syria, 20s, Ankara)

Amid migratory perils, the African respondents adapted their religious practices in detention, forced prostitution and dangerous circumstances, e.g. turning prayers spoken-out-loud into silent prayers. Some detained in the Libyan immigration centres feared sanctions for spoken-out-loud prayers. Without access to a prayer space or a religious text, they would intensify their worship in silence. Thus, many continued talking to God and praying in their thoughts as they desperately needed help.

Ayesha from Sierra Leone (Appendix 1), in her 30s, was one of the interviewees who escalated her prayers while sex trafficked, holding onto and altering her prayer practice throughout her migration experience. After her boat capsized she survived drowning at the sea and sex trafficking in Libya, she praised God for giving her strength to swim and save herself and an unaccompanied boy. While sexually trafficked and trapped in a room without windows, she adapted her five daily prayers by completing a 'dry' ablution without water, and performing her prayers at assumed times and directed towards the Kaaba. In her increased prayers during captivity, she found hope and distraction from sexual violence:

'I pray most of the time, I don't know the time of prayer, because where we stay . . . I don't hear anything and the security guards he only gets near us when the people that rape us are around or when they bring food for us . . . And nobody has a phone or watch so we don't know time . . . But I pray, I sit and I assume now is . . . isha [night prayer]*, fajr* [morning prayer]*, so I just stand and pray just like that . . . I just take a cartoon and turn to the wall and pray. Of course I pray with surah* [Qur'an chapter] *and sometimes I pray for, astaghfarAllah* [seeking forgiveness] *. . . I count it, sometimes over one thousand times . . . It helped me quickly and allowed me to escape in Libya, where the chances of doing so were incredibly low . . . it is only done by God . . .* ' (Ayesha from Sierra Leone, 30s, Medenine)

She believed God accepted her prayers as she eventually managed to escape without paying a ransom but with help of a security guard who saw her, barely alive and pregnant. She walked to Tunisia on foot where she was given medical support and delivered twin boys born of sexual violence. These two near-death experiences led her to intensify personal religious practices, such as prayers and fasting, pleading to God for her resettlement to a third country where she could overcome trauma and rebuild her life. Seeking spiritual and practical guidance, she was the only participant who, after sexual violence and reaching Tunisia, sought an online consultation with an imam overseas who relieved her concerns through spiritual support:

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> '*… when I messaged him* [via Facebook] *he responded. I called him and explained my situation to him, so he directed me and encouraged me to pray more and pray harder … after I was released from the kidnappers, I was severely raped so I contacted him …* [I asked] "*would it be possible for me to get married?*"'

Upon arrival, women appreciated God for enabling them to reach their destinations and most asked for forgiveness. They thought by remembering God, God would remember them. Some women reported spousal violence to God in their individual prayers, seeking a solution and making their partners non-abusive. Some Muslim survivors relied particularly on late night prayers (such as *tahajjud*, the last third of the night). Jenah, from Iraq, had lost everything and had separated from her husband after seeking refuge in Ankara. Being ineligible for public aid due to nationality-based criteria, she pleaded to God to uphold her honour and sought protection from prostitution:

> '*One doesn't know what will happen in the future, I pray that God will keep my head up; I don't want something cause my head to drop, to feel shame from the people …* [I fear] *prostitution, but we want God to save us from every bad thing.*' (Jenah from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

In prayers women found space to reflect on their problems as well as to relieve their emotions. Some cried to God regularly to ease their pain. Structured and regular prayers assisted many in regulating their emotions. Levantine women described in much detail daily routines of their religious worship which kept them going. Many found the most comfort in their sunrise (*fajr*) and sunset (*maghrib*) prayers, some in *duha* (a prayer between sunrise and midday) and *nafl/sunnah* prayers (an optional prayer) which they deployed to seek additional benefits. In particular, supplications and Qur'anic recitation, morning and evening devotions and observing religious holidays, helped women to maintain a routine and manage their feelings and painful memories such as of exploitation or losing family members. Some considered their prayers as their only 'weapon' for survival, especially during prostration to God (*sujūd*). Amina from Syria, a widow and mother of six, facing discrimination at work, destitution and continued abuse from the family of her daughter's husband, relied on her voluntary and obligatory prayers:

> '*The greatest blessing is that I always pray to God. When I am in sujūd* [bowing] *I feel I am connected to God, I always pray that he protects me and my children and I cry a lot, and I pray Tahajjud* [night prayer] *and I feel so much better afterwards… After each prayer, I pray nafila and I pray two rak'ahs showing gratitude to God, and I also pray at night… I feel that praying makes me so comfortable… sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night feeling so afraid and concerned [anxious], and*

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when I pray I feel that prayer is my weapon . . . I no longer feel any bad feelings.' (Amina from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Almost all Muslim respondents and around half of Christian respondents focused on their religion to stop worrying about their problems. Three quarters of the women sought help from God to relieve their anger. A combination of different prayers and religious rituals provided women with immediate relief from some effects of VAW and enabled them to fill time with positive spiritual effects—feelings of peace and protection. For instance, mentioning blessings for the Prophet and maintaining *wudu* (ritual purification) helped Muslim respondents to generate positive feelings.

'*This morning . . . when I go and make wudu, I make salat and it makes me release some comfortable feeling in my heart . . . but sometimes when you angry and make salat . . . it makes you understand your problem in clearer way*' (Amira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Many Levantine respondents relied on reading the Qur'an daily and believed that their reading made them more patient and secured provision for their needs. Some sought protection with the Qur'an, for example by playing its recordings at night and reciting the Qur'anic chapter '*Al-Kahf*' every Friday, which Muslim respondents believed would protect them from evil in the following week. Bead prayers *(dhikr)* occupied women's time and helped them to counter boredom. Madinah from Syria in her 60s said, '*I never feel bored because of reciting Azkar*'. Finally, hearing an *adhan* (a call to prayer from a mosque) from their new homes made some Muslim women feel secured.

Although only a few Muslim respondents occasionally prayed in the mosque, and one Christian prayed in a group at home, these women found additional strength in communal prayers and believed that by praying together they would gain more blessings from God. In particular, women in Türkiye increased their attendance in mosques for evening prayers during Ramadan. Sumaya from Ivory Coast found strength by attending mosque in southern Tunisia:

'*Every Friday, I like to pray with other people. It is better with other people. When I go to the Mosque and I pray in a group, it gives me strength, the strength of community and Islam. I saw the Mosque and I felt happy . . . I asked if women go in and pray and they said yes.*' (Sumaya from Ivory Coast, 40s, Medenine)

Conversely, church services were present in the North, for many inaccessible among a large influx of Christian migrants in the South, where pastors paid occasional visits. In turn, many Christian migrants were unable to recover communal religious resources lost in their journeys, such as religious study groups from home

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countries. For a limited number of migrants of one Christian religious denomination, Christmas visits to the nearest church were organised annually by the shelter provider. Thus, they relied on their individual prayers and only occasional joint prayers and religious celebrations with family and friends.

The above activities enabled many respondents to feel safer by cultivating a closer relationship with a higher being, whom some experienced as an attachment figure. This perceived intimacy with God provided comfort and a sense of divine closeness (Galanter et al., 1979). Women utilised different religious resources, often forming intimate relationships with the divine. Almost all thirty-six women sought God's love and mercy and most women said they felt the presence and availability of God in their lives, through their prayers, as a lifeline:

> *'This is something to wake up the morning. Like if I don't pray, or do something special, prayer is like water . . . I like it when I can concentrate and give thanks to God.'* (Gloria from DRC, 30s, Zarzis)

Those who had lost family kept particularly close to God, entrusting Him with their worries and hopes. Many respondents felt that their prayers, answered by God in some ways, resulted in an alleviation of their suffering and positive life changes. They held on to their religious beliefs from the religious scriptures in which God promised them nearness if they called Him. Some believed that God brought them closer to Him through their hardship:

> '*. . . when you are in hardship, you always feel that you need to be closer to God . . . in this way God draws me closer to Him, and God gives me what I want . . .* ' (Lotifa from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Thus, respondents harnessed their relationship with God by remembering Him, reading and listening to the sacred text. Where it was inaccessible, they expressed a desire to read it, regardless of their literacy capacities, in the anticipation of getting closer to God. Seeking closeness with God was akin to adopting an active collaborative approach to problem-solving by seeking God's love, support and partnership (Harrison et al., 2001). Women who engaged with a religious text believed they were talking to God directly, as if they were reading/hearing God's own words and did not seek mediators. This was specific among Levantine women for whom a connection with the religious scriptures sufficed. Many of them memorised parts of the Qur'an by heart or owned a Qur'an and expressed no need for external religious support:

> *"'Because my book is here, my religion is here, and when you read the Qur'an and you understand that you're talking to God and these are God's words, and if you*

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understand what's written in the Qur'an, you won't need to go to any Masjid or any Imam . . . ' (Shukri from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Conversely, the African survivors wanted to read a Bible or a Qur'an in their language and consult a religious leader in times of crisis, as they believed it would allow them to talk and get closer to God, in turn enabling them to feel calmer and reflect on their life from a biblical perspective. Restricted access to a Bible for Christian respondents in Tunisia meant depriving some of hope and hindering their coping and healing. For instance, Nina, from Nigeria, in her 20s, who had lost her two-year-old son in a sea rescue operation near Italy, was one of the women who was unable to access a religious scripture in southern Tunisia and experienced loss. Previously surviving kidnapping and detentions and then not hearing about her son for several years, she developed a mental health and heart disease, idealising suicide:

'Anything I do, I am not able to think again. I lost my sight because my baby is not with me . . . But now I could do something stupid to myself . . . my baby is nowhere to be found . . . ' (Nina from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

She also felt guilty about the unresolved matters with her deceased father and blamed herself for his death by making him severely distressed upon her unannounced disappearance from her home country. She felt spiritually deserted as she could not access the Bible nor speak to a pastor, proving her displacement experience led to resource loss. She put her hopes of rebuilding her life into the reconnection with the Bible, which was unavailable in southern Tunisia:

'If I had [the] Bible I would have life again now, because everything about me is a loss, so if I have [the] Bible I could have hope, every day it could talk to me. At the moment I have nothing, so I would pray, sit, think . . . I could start life again, because inside me I am crying, I have pain . . . the Bible could help me and . . . give me more courage.'

Moreover, many women fasted, as part of their coping strategies, to draw closer to God and provide them with an opportunity to increase piety and their religious status in front of God. They fasted with hopes to gain God's mercy to transform their lives.

'This is not the life I want. So, for me to fast is for God to open a new door in my life and I want God to help me . . . Sometimes, seven days a week for a whole month.' (Aretta from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

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For Muslim women, daily fasting marked the holy month of Ramadan. Observing this religious holiday was an important part of their lives in which they and their families found anticipation for their life transformation.

> *'I am very happy that it's Ramadan now; I stay awake until Suhur* (morning meal before fasting)*, and I pray a lot while I am waiting, and I drink coffee so I can pray more. I wake up my kids for Suhur, we eat and pray and then sleep.'* (Lamia from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Daily routines of women changed during Ramadan and filled with increased hours of worship activities and social interactions in their neighbourhoods. Women often broke fast with neighbours and friends in the evenings and prayed together at night. However, I witnessed some women were unable to share *iftar* (fast-breaking meal) due to food insecurity and often had no food on the table to break the fast with. They relied on charity and religious alms for the poor, such as *zakat* and *sadaqa*, to survive.

Spiritual and emotional adaptive religious coping

I now turn to spirituality which in women's stories frequently related to their lived experience of religion (Schneiders, 1986). It manifested through feelings and emotions, night-time dreams, fulfilment of their prayers and feelings of God's presence prior to and during migration. Lived spiritual/religious experiences and the previously mentioned cognitive and behavioural coping strategies enabled spiritual adaptive religious coping by emotional engagement. Herein, I focus on women's survival in life-threatening situations, God-given power and protection, patience, gratitude and healing, interpreted within a religious framework.

Women described God as central in their survival experiences. Most attributed their strength in their hardship to God, who they considered to be their only supporter. Survivors perceived their experiences of survival in life threatening situations and journeys as miracles. They trusted God saved them from dangerous situations and entrusted their lives in transit and refuge, believing God would enable them to reach their destinations. Those who survived drowning and armed conflict described God as their only saviour and source of empowerment. African survivors felt safeguarded by God from kidnapping, trafficking and detention, while Levantine survivors talked about being safeguarded from war, violence, atrocities, honour-based violence, domestic violence and sexual exploitation:

> *'My brother used to say that the moment he comes to our home, he would kill me with one shot, but I was protected by God because he couldn't take a day off.'* (Khadija from Syria, 30s, Ankara).

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'If it wasn't because of God they would have killed us. Many people died in our presence . . . So, it is God who helped us and protected us . . . I thank God for that . . . I leave everything to God . . . ' (Taira from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

Most respondents felt empowered by God to continue their journeys and take risks to reach their destinations. In particular, the African women believed that God enhanced their inner strength and 'power to' rescue themselves in dangerous crossings of seas and deserts, and to escape trafficking, violence and imprisonment. These events in turn also deepened their faith, leading to a close connection with God. As religious beliefs and practices made them stronger, a faith induced 'power within' was often mentioned in relation to their inner strength and traits of religiosity. Some believed that God watched over them and facilitated their perseverance to reach their destination, viewing their survival as a gift from God. Ayesha's story, described earlier, is akin to those of several survivors; she felt she had received powers and protection from God in transit and that her faith grew. While almost drowning Ayesha continued praying and felt empowered to swim and rescue herself and an unaccompanied boy, solidifying her faith:

'*In the Mediterranean Sea I saw people drowning. I am not a good swimmer, but that day I had the strength to swim and to even save another life . . . God has a reason for me to stay alive . . . he is the reason why I am alive. Actually, my religion got stronger because I am not scared of death, when it comes, I know I have to go . . .*' (Ayesha from Sierra Leone, 30s, Medenine)

Women's belief in God played an active and important role across their perilous journeys. Their continued prayers and invocations shaped their religious experiences of what they believed was 'a godly' empowerment and survival. Especially for African respondents, who undertook dangerous sea crossings, awareness of their survival among many deceased strengthened their connection with God, as they appreciated another chance to live. Some regularly praised God and asked for help, believing that nobody helped them but God and perceived any support received as sent by God. Survivors felt God's 'doing' at different stages of migration. Sophia from DRC, in her 20s, was a survivor of rape by smugglers and detention guards, who relied on her continued prayer to seek God's help and memorised verses of their scripts throughout her refugee journey, while finding strength, solace and solutions:

'*We were seeing a lot of people dying . . . The countries changed* [during transit] *. . . but we were still praying. Whatever the difficulties, we always pray, we cry, we pray, with the strength that God gave me to walk in the desert to reach the border . . . I was pregnant . . . I had a passage that stood out for me, that I read 33 times. When I have to find hope . . . Jeremie 33. I would always refer to it . . . It would always give me*

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strength . . . When you praise Him, He will answer and show you the hidden things that you don't know. You see the hidden things, and that is victory . . . it is God's speech. Every time I pray, it has an effect. He has the solution to all the problems.' (Sophia from DRC, 20s, Zarzis)

Survivors also considered God as most merciful for allowing them to live, despite witnessing many people dying in their journeys and war. Nearly all women praised God and with humility expressed their gratitude for survival. Some thanked God for sending people who had helped them, including smugglers who assisted them to cross Levantine borders. Valerie was one of those who continued to glorify God and ask for help and forgiveness:

'*In a Christian way, I believe that "where there is God, there is hope", every morning you need to thank God for your life because many died . . . but God kept us alive and I delivered my baby safely, so I have to thank my God . . . in the last 2 years, they pushed all my girlfriends to the sea and they all died, but they didn't put me on that boat . . . it capsized and everyone died. God saved me. All I have to say is, God thank you.*' (Grace from Ghana, 20s, Medenine)

Likewise, most women came to terms with their situations through patience derived from their faith and inner strength and almost all women responded in the survey that they reminded themselves of God's command to be patient. Some believed that, through their experiences, God tested their patience. Fortitude and acceptance inspired by religious faith prevented three survivors from committing suicide. One of them, Kameela, a medical doctor, had lost her son in the 'bakery massacre' (during the bombardment of Aleppo), having previously lost her brother and father. As a mother of five she moved alone with her children to Ankara. Her spirituality soothed her pain and enabled her to rebuild her life in faith:

'It's from God, he granted me patience. I lost my son, so if it wasn't for God's help, I'd have broken down and given up . . . When my son died, I thought I'd commit suicide, but God gave me peace of mind, and prayer and the Qur'an helped me become more patient. After I buried my son, I looked up and cried that God grants me patience . . . If God hadn't granted me patience, I'd have cried every time I looked at my son's photos . . . but now . . . I speak about him proudly, thanks to God.' (Kameela from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Such spiritual experiences often enabled women to feel peace from within. In accounts of domestic violence, religious rituals enabled survivors to separate from their husbands. Some prayed to God to remove their abuser and trusted that reading the Qur'an would enable them to find the patience needed to stay alone and persevere in their decisions to separate from their partners.

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'*I reported him* [her husband] *to God, and he answered me; I don't know where my husband is now . . . I asked God to help me get rid of him . . . I prayed and read the Qur'an, and for six months I didn't talk to my husband, not even a word. God granted me patience.*' (Samira from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Women talked to God and were inspired by their role models (i.e. their prophets) as well as their night-time dreams, which were interpreted by several survivors as signs from God. Such dreams gave them courage and hope. For example, some women dreamt about undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca and fulfilling their religious duties. In such dreams women would find spiritual guidance and fulfilment.

'*When I was in Syria before I had any children, the doctor told my husband that we'll never get children naturally, and I was sleeping and had a vision; I was on Hajj* [annual pilgrimage] *and in front of the Kaaba, and I saw my sister that I didn't see for 10 years. She told me "Come and I'll make one duaa* [prayer]*", and I told God that I wanted to be a mom. I woke up after that and got pregnant that month.*' (Haifa from Syria, 30s, Ankara)

Another woman, who longed to have a child, described a deeply spiritual experience during Ramadan, after which she conceived. It was the night of power (Layla Al-Qadr), believed by Muslims to be the best of nights, in which she felt that her prayers were accepted.

'It was Ramadan and it was Layla Al-Qadr and I made duaa, crying my heart out, that he gives me another child, and thank God my duaa was accepted and I got pregnant right after Ramadan. That made my belief stronger, and I realized that, if I had difficulty, I should always pray to God.' (Halina from Syria, 40s, Ankara)

Women with medical conditions also believed God would improve their health. Several respondents experienced 'faith healing' from their prayers and recitation of a religious script and attributed their cure to the power of faith. The Levantine respondents said that reading the Qur'an improved their physical health and relieved symptoms and they believed in its healing properties. Respondents of both faiths considered that healing comes only from God who also determines their health condition. In sickness, women conducted prayers to cure themselves and their children and recited the religious scripture while touching their injuries. For example, Kanika, in her 20s from Nigeria, whose asylum claim was rejected and was required to leave a migrant shelter with her two children, recalled faith healing of her daughter:

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> '*. . . this one's* [her daughter's] *body was very hot . . .* [she] *vomited 4 times in the night, so I was crying . . . I prayed to God, I wanted to go to hospital, but after an hour of praying to God, her temperature went down . . . God is the one who healed her . . .*' (Kanika from Nigeria, 20s, Medenine)

Similarly, Janah from Iraq, a single mother of three in her 30s, experienced healing of her sick child upon her supplication:

> '*When I went to the hospital today morning, I started saying lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh* [There is no might nor power except in God] *and asking for forgiveness, and when I arrived at the doctor's, the doctor told me that my daughter's blood was clean from the disease, there was some in her urine and he gave her medicine.*' (Janah from Iraq, 30s, Ankara)

In sum, survivors' spiritual and emotional adaptive religious coping, through empowerment, feelings and psycho-somatic interactions between their mind and body, was a culmination of their cognitive and behavioural adaptive religious coping strategies. These, in turn, rested on their religious beliefs and practices and supported their mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. This chapter signifies the importance of psychological and behavioural connectivity leading to spiritual experiences, which contribute to coping capacities in displacement.

Religious resources, coping and mental health

Further quantitative analysis reinforces the above findings and unfolds telling details regarding religious coping patterns between different groups of women in two locations. Results disaggregated by location point to temporospatial differences in the impact of religious coping on Levantine and African respondents, which offer useful insights for policy and practice.

To explore the relationship between resilience and religion, a tailored questionnaire combined the three scales (brief religious coping—B-RCOPE, psychological distress—PD, and post-traumatic growth inventory—PTGI). Mainly closed-ended questions were used in this questionnaire, including a brief religious coping scale (B-RCOPE) (Pargament et al., 2011), psychological distress scale (Kessler et al., 2002, hereafter Kessler scale/PD) and a selection of items from the post-traumatic growth inventory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996, hereafter PTGI).

Recognising that distress levels may influence the form and extent of religious coping (Pargament et al., 2000), it is important to note that most women exhibited both high religious coping and high psychological distress, and women's accounts consistently emphasised positive emotional, spiritual, physical and mental effects

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of religion on their mental health. The survey results reaffirm high levels of religious coping revealed in interviews. Religion played an important role in the lives of all but one survivor, in the Likert scale (whereby 1 is 'none of the time' and 10 'all the time'). Many women (twenty-one Muslim and seven Christian) scored 10 concerning the extent to which religion/faith/spirituality helped them cope with their experiences of abuse. Overall, Muslim women scored higher, on average 7.7, than Christian women, scoring on average 6.3 (Appendix 7).

In addition, as presented in Table 5.2, displaced survivors in this sample scored relatively high on the positive religious coping (PRC) sub-scale (25.66 out of 28 in Likert scale). The initial analysis of the mean average (hereafter average or mean/s) scores showed differences between different social groups in their self-reported religious coping and psychological distress. Although both Christian and Muslim respondents scored relatively high on the Brief RCOPE scale and its positive (PRC) subscale, Levantine and Muslim respondents from both research sites scored higher in the PRC and post-traumatic growth, and lower in the negative religious coping (NRC) subscale than all African and just Christian respondents based in Tunisia. Such differences suggest religious context matters for women's resilience capacities, signalling that being part of religious minorities may relate to slightly lower religious coping abilities.

Table 5.2 Mean average of religious coping and mental health among respondents

Participants	Overall (n=38)		Levantine (n=23)		African (n=15)		Muslim (n=27)		Christian (n=11)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Religious coping (Brief RCOPE) (out of 56)	37.87	5.03	38.22	3.33	37.33	6.99	38.56	3.61	36.18	7.43
Positive religious coping (PRC) (out of 28)	25.66	3.60	26.74	1.68	24.00	4.99	26.59	1.95	23.36	5.46
Negative religious coping (NRC) (out of 28)	12.21	3.99	11.48	2.86	13.33	5.19	11.96	3.44	12.82	5.25
Psychological distress (PD) (out of 40)	32.82	9.19	31.35	9.08	35.07	9.19	32.19	9.45	34.36	8.72
Post-traumatic growth inventory (PTGI) (out of 48)	34.74	7.97	36.65	5.86	31.80	9.93	36.41	6.48	30.64	9.99

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Overall, respondents scored much lower in NRC than in PRC, the prevalence of positive religious coping mechanisms among them, as illustrated earlier in this chapter. The reliance on religious resources and religious coping sustained women psychologically and helped to stabilise their emotions, relieved anxieties and offered some degree of certainty in the uncertainty of displacement. A closer look at interactions based on cross-tabulations between the items of the B-RCOPE scale, PD and PTGI scales suggest numerous associations between different individual items, suggesting relationships between PRC and PTGI, and PRC/NRC and PD.[3]

However, further tests in quantitative software (SPSS) that compared mean averages, such as a T-test, show only statistical significance in the difference of means between Levantine and African respondents in the PRC score and between Muslim and Christian respondents in PRC and PTGI scores (Appendix 8). For example, the mean value of PRC for Levantine women is 26.74, while the corresponding value for African women is 24.00. The difference between these two groups is statistically significant.[4] There are also similar differences noted between Muslim and Christian scores in PRC and PTGI with statistical significance, indicating potential differences across these groups due to contextual and situational differences (e.g. different stages of forced migration). Although such results may be distorted by the small sample size, they indicate that while PRC and PTGI scores differed, all groups of respondents suffered from severe psychological distress, as elaborated in Chapter 3, regardless of their PRC and NRC score.

Additionally, the correlation test of Kendall's Tau was used to identify relationships between scores of the scales deployed. The test was considered suitable for a small sample size and meeting data assumptions. Internal consistency in the scales was verified using Cronbach's Alpha. The results indicated moderate positive relationships between the PRC subscale and PTGI among all respondents (τb=.309, p=0.012) which suggest increases in positive religious coping was related to increased post-traumatic growth. Also, moderate positive relationships were found between less prevalent negative religious coping and higher psychological distress (τb=.374, p=0.002) which indicate increases in negative religious coping was related to increased distress. These findings carry important practical implications for practitioners to foster positive religious coping—such as encouraging meaning-making, hope and supportive faith communities—while mitigating negative religious coping by addressing feelings of guilt, spiritual discontent or

[3] For example, some respondents scoring high in PRC reported feeling lower levels of depression, nervousness and hopelessness, greater feelings of self-reliance, greater ability to handle difficulties, to appreciate and accept their situations, as well as having stronger faith and being stronger than one thought they were, compared to those scoring lower in the PRC scale. Further, some women who questioned their liability for receiving God's punishment scored high in feelings of anxiety and hopelessness.

[4] Significance with a 10% difference in variances across groups.

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Table 5.3 Nonparametric correlations (Kendall's Tau Test) among respondents

Participants	Overall (n=38)		Levantine (n=23)		African (n=15)		Muslim (n=27)		Christian (n=11)	
	$\tau_{b=}$	p=	$\tau_{b=}$	p=	$\tau_{b=}$	p=	$\tau_{b=}$	p=	$\tau_{b=}$	p=
PRC—PTGI	.309*	0.012	0.179	0.285	0.256	0.206	.307*	0.044	0.059	0.810
NRC—PD	.374**	0.002	.350*	0.029	.394*	0.050	.425**	0.004	0.295	0.229

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

self-blame through culturally sensitive counselling. This approach can strengthen post-traumatic growth and reduce psychological distress, particularly among Muslim women, who scored higher on negative coping dynamics.

Notably, the limitations of these results, as they are cross-sectional, do not allow for causal inferences. Another limitation is that further analysis shows differences in correlations between different social groups. First, one group (Muslim respondents) seems to largely drive the relationship between PRC and PTGI within the overall sample. Second, the association between NRC and PD was moderate only among Muslim respondents. It was weak among Levantine and African respondents, and very weak among Christian, as illustrated in Table 5.3.[5]

These statistical results indicate that wider environmental factors influenced high levels of distress among respondents, which might by addressed by an integrated intersectional and socioecological approach. Such an approach is critical to explore barriers to religious coping for different social groups, for instance related to gender and migration stressors, at different levels and across different stages of displacement.

Data from the CORR analysis indicate that African respondents—particularly those with interrupted journeys and precarious refuge—experienced greater losses of religious resources, coinciding with slightly lower positive religious coping and higher psychological distress than more settled refugee women in Türkiye. Among Christian participants, such losses were also associated with lower post-traumatic growth. Migration-related stressors prompted many African migrants to shift from organised religious activities to individual, non-organised practices; as religious minorities in Tunisia, they frequently expressed a desire for external religious support amid the absence of communal resources. By contrast, many Levantine respondents—accustomed to personal religious practices or wary of institutions

[5] While causal inferences cannot be assumed, such findings indicate that NRC cannot be attributed with high PD, as the correlations between psychological distress and NRC were generally weak. The case was different for Muslim respondents for whom the relationship between NRC and PD was moderate.

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due to sectarian persecution—reported gains in personal religious resources. Muslim participants, as religious majorities in Türkiye and Tunisia, tended to record slightly higher religious coping and post-traumatic growth despite elevated psychological distress.

Conclusion: Implications on resilience and protection

This chapter contributes to knowledge by enhancing understanding of religion as a resilience and coping resource among displaced women survivors of VAW. It addresses the second objective of this book by exploring how religion shapes women's resilience and coping with VAW and displacement. From intersectional and socioecological perspectives, the analysis reveals diverse expressions of religious coping across different groups of women, operating at multiple levels of the socioecological system. Religious coping was contextual and shaped by the daily stressors and evolving environment during displacement and women's mobility, which often mediated their access to religious resources which for many were critical in deploying agential coping strategies. As the comparative patterns above illustrate, the availability and loss of religious resources differed significantly across settings, shaping both coping strategies and mental health outcomes.

The religion-based resilience continuum in forced migration involved the interrelationship of three elements: shifting faith, conservation of religious resources and adaptive religious coping strategies, which contributed to a stronger inner self, as illustrated in Figure 5.4. Surviving threats to life, VAW experiences and hardships in refuge, on the whole, strengthened migrant women's faith and inner-self, their religious coping capacities and conservation of religious resources. In situations in which the women barely survived, religious coping mechanisms were among the few mechanisms available to enable their psycho-social survival and healing.

Shifting faith was a central element upholding the religious coping mechanisms, which operated in a process that I refer to, in the context of migration, as the conservation of religious resources (CORR), inspired by Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory. This chapter expands the pool of available transcultural resources in COR theory through adding religious resources to this list and introducing the term conservation of religious resources. By relying on religious coping, women conserved their religious resources that mattered to them, generating coping capacities. Personal, non-institutional, religious resources were often seen as 'the only solution' (and perhaps one of the few available resources which they could retain and over which had some control), enabling survival and restoring a level of agency. Lost communal religious resources, such as places of worship, were substituted with gains in personal religious resources, such as stronger faith and closer relations with God and prayers.

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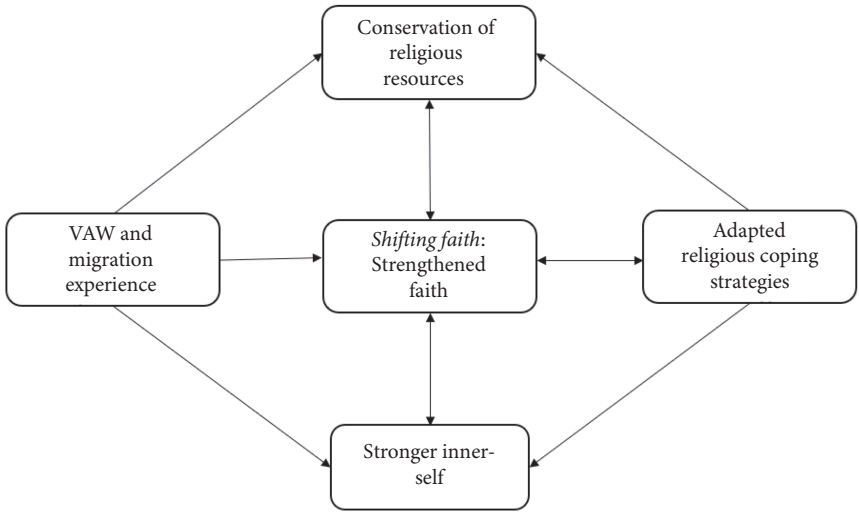


Figure 5.4 Religion-based resilience in displacement (Author's own elaboration)

Levantine and African displaced women engaged in fairly high levels of religious coping. They relied on 'adaptive religious coping', which refers to a mechanism whereby survivors adjust their religious coping behaviour amid changing circumstances, access to resources and daily stressors in displacement. Women drew upon their preserved religious beliefs, practices and experiences, enabling their cognitive, behavioural and emotional/spiritual strategies. These adaptive religious coping strategies buffered the impacts of displacement and VAW, such as anxiety and psychological distress. They also supported participants emotionally, mentally and spiritually by helping them to find meaning, build resistance, keep calm, connect with God and to feel empowered and protected. Turning to religion represented an agential act of seeking help and summoning resilience in the absence of other forms of power.

This chapter contributes to religious coping theory by identifying its gender specific patterns and nuanced differences among displaced women of different backgrounds. The Levantine and Muslim participants from both settings scored slightly higher in the positive religious coping and post-traumatic growth inventory and lower in the negative religious coping subscale and psychological distress than the African and Christian respondents. However, the correlation between the negative religious coping and psychological distress among Muslim respondents was stronger than among other groups, highlighting that unvoiced spiritual struggles and distress coincided in this group. The parallel loss of religious resources and partially negative religious coping outcomes, alongside slightly higher psychological distress, suggest the spiritual needs of African migrants (Christian and Muslim alike) were less fulfilled. Unresolved spiritual struggles, clearly voiced in

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the interviews, could have contributed to their poor mental health as spiritual struggles can be related to PTSD symptoms (Brende cited in Goździak, 2002). These results thus highlight the importance of considering social context across the stages of migration in shaping women's religious coping abilities and mental health outcomes.

Numerous factors can exacerbate negative religious coping—factors that aid organisations could address. These can include loss of religious resources, slightly higher psychological distress, lack of spiritual care, minority status in a religious majority and potentially (beyond women's narratives) restricted religious freedoms, religious discrimination or persecution. Because resilience is dynamic, context-dependent and person-specific, adopting an intersectional and socioecological approach is essential to capture the diverse resources linked to intersecting identities at individual, community and societal levels—thereby strengthening systemic protection solutions. While religion was a key resource for many women, it often intersected with other dimensions of identity, as reflected in their narratives: religious coping was always connected to specific roles, such as being a woman, a migrant, a mother, a compatriot or a neighbour. These positions and interactions within their ecological systems shaped how resilience was expressed. Researchers could advance theories on the conservation of religious resources and adaptive coping, while practitioners should integrate faith-sensitive approaches into humanitarian aid to enhance resilience and improve mental health outcomes.

In conclusion, displaced women's faith kept them going. Many women, during different stages of forced migration, relied only on God and combined God-reliance with self-reliance, forming intimate alliances with God to overcome hardship, as agential acts. In the next chapter, I consider the ways in which religious influences on displaced women, discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, were accounted for by the humanitarian practitioners in practice.

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PART 3

RETHINKING HUMANITARIANISM, PROTECTION AND RELIGION

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6
Humanitarian default
'In(ex)clusion' of religion

'There is even sort of a prejudice within the international humanitarian and development system … they see religion … culture, tradition as all negative, [as if]*'we need to modernise these people … so they're not so dependent on these old ways of thinking*' … ' (Sara, Former GBV Coordinator, INGO)

Introduction

This chapter critically explores humanitarian practitioners' attitudes to religion and violence against women (VAW) and highlights the diverse ways in which humanitarian practitioners account for and work with religion and faith when supporting displaced populations. While the previous chapters focused on VAW experience and religion in forced displacement, this chapter discusses to what extent secular humanitarian responses to VAW approach religion in practice. I argue that religion overall has been insufficiently accounted for in the secular humanitarian infrastructure, overlooking the religious needs of survivors and their diverse resilience capacities.

This chapter draws on interviews and an online survey with thirty-six humanitarian practitioners—two-thirds women and one-third men. I engaged VAW/gender-based violence (GBV) and mental health and psychosocial technical leads from Ankara and Medenine, along with global sector specialists. Sixteen practitioners participated in key informant interviews and twenty-four completed the online survey 'Faith Inclusion in VAW Response' (2019–2020). I conducted all interviews in English, either in person or online, and each lasted about forty-five minutes. Appendix 2 lists the specialists interviewed: psychologists, protection staff, programme heads and GBV advisors/co-ordinators. All worked for secular agencies except one from an international faith-based organisation. I used purposive, convenience and snowball sampling. To recruit participants, I attended local humanitarian events, emailed agencies in Ankara and Medenine, and advertised through the UN protection mailing list. In Medenine, I contacted coordinators

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via word-of-mouth and professional networks from a prior scoping visit. International participants joined through UNFPA's GBV Community of Practice and survey respondents who expressed interest in interviews.

Key-informants were first asked about the nature of their work and how they viewed the role of religion in VAW experience and humanitarian responses. Then they were asked about how survivors of VAW use religious resources and the role of local faith communities in supporting migrants, as well as the role of wider humanitarian infrastructure to recognise the value of religion in VAW response. Participants were requested to draw on their lived professional experiences and personal reflections. They were not probed about their personal religious beliefs or organisational ideologies, but about their organisational approach to engaging with religious dimensions and actors in humanitarian protection.

An online survey used Qualtrics as a data collection tool and contained closed and open-ended questions. After expressing consent, respondents were asked how they accounted for religion, faith and spirituality in their work. Respondents included ten practitioners from non-faith NGOs, seven from FBOs (4 international, 3 local), one from the UN, three independent practitioners and three researchers. Respondents were based in the following countries: Australia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Türkiye, United Kingdom and Yemen. The majority (sixteen respondents) operated internationally, five nationally and three regionally and locally. Most worked on GBV prevention and response, risk mitigation and child protection, training and capacity building and a minority in advocacy, policy and research. Two were specialised in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

In particular, here I illustrate the secular and religious dynamics in humanitarian responses and introduce the concept of religious in(ex)clusion spectrum, which refers to the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of faith, religion and spirituality in humanitarian practices (Figure 6.1) with five approaches—avoiding, instrumentalist, pragmatic, transformational and mixed. In other words, it is a phenomenon where individual practitioners may include religious elements even within a system that structurally excludes them. It examines how humanitarian protection, GBV and MHPSS practitioners approach religion, faith and spirituality in their work with forced migrants. As outlined in Chapter 1, *faith* refers

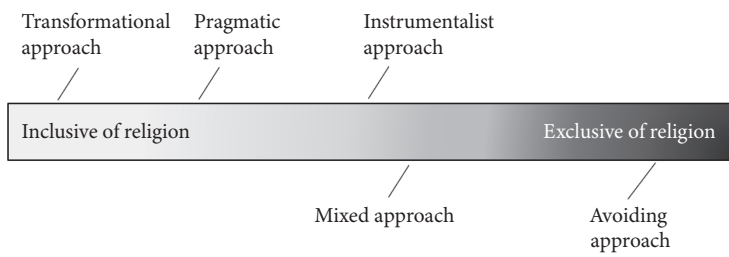


Figure 6.1 The spectrum of religious in(ex)clusion (Author's own elaboration)

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to various forms of belief or trust in some form of transcendent reality (Lunn, 2009), while *religion* refers to an institutionalised system of belief and practices regarding a supernatural power. Spirituality describes a personal lived connection with greater divine/cosmic power that can exist within and without religion (Schneiders, 1986).

The chapter demonstrates that humanitarian service providers engaged with religion as a meaningful factor, to varied degrees by default excluding religion. They operated along the spectrum from exclusive and avoiding approach on one end, mixed approach in the middle and inclusive approach on the other end with pragmatic, instrumentalist and transformational strands. Yet, the findings show promise that working with religious dimensions is possible, illustrating that religious inclusion happens in the dominant humanitarian discourse of religious exclusion in the process, which I term in(ex)clusion. While this work does not claim generalisability, it does provide key themes for future research.

The chapter builds on the literature evidencing the exclusion of religious considerations in humanitarian and development responses introduced in Chapter 1 and 2 (e.g. Ager, 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2017; Wilkinson, 2018; Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). Specifically, it draws on the argument that functional secularism excludes religion in humanitarian action by its *privatisation, marginalisation and instrumentalisation* (Ager and Ager, 2015). However, I illustrate a gradual shift from excluding to including religion in protection responses to VAW in displacement contexts.

Using mixed methods data (interviews and surveys) collected with humanitarian practitioners in Türkiye, Tunisia and globally, I theorise and contribute to knowledge with the concept of religious in(ex)clusion spectrum, demonstrating that varying levels of faith sensitivity led to religious exclusion and inclusion in the humanitarian protection programmes, as discussed throughout. The analysis draws on a global online survey on 'Faith Inclusion in GBV Response', key-informant interviews (KIIs, in-person and online) mainly with secular organisations and practitioners and interviews with displaced women. Key informants provided immediate migrant assistance, reception facilities, shelter, health screening and MHPSS. Also, the majority was involved in VAW awareness-raising, case management and referral facilitation. Some worked on migrant integration and social cohesion initiatives in host communities in Türkiye, Tunisia or other Middle East and African countries. Those in Tunisia also provided burial and family finding services. It is important to note that around half of the participants were inspired by their faith and religion, and another half were not (regardless of whether they worked for a secular or faith-based organisation). I begin by discussing how practitioners from mainstream international and local organisations, whom I interviewed perceived the role of religion in VAWG. All names of respondents are pseudonymised here. The next section aims to provide

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an overarching sense of their attitudes to religion in the context of their protection work before theorising religious in(ex)clusion spectrum.

How practitioners view religion

Practitioners interviewed in Türkiye, Tunisia and online globally shared balanced views on the religion of the communities they served, viewing it as a multiple-edged sword with multiple oppressive and transformative functions. Religion was considered a part of socialisation, inseparable from and intertwined with, culture in social ecology. The shifting nature of faith in migrant trajectories was recognised, with a tendency to grow, decline and, in the case of the survivors of war atrocities, also to terminate due to lost faith.

On one hand, religion was seen as an important source of resilience for forced migrants. '*With resilience, there are no rules,*' said Zarna, a psychologist from a major medical INGO in Tunisia, describing that different things kept migrants going. Among other resilience assets, she recalled hope to reach desired destinations and faith. Some practitioners across contexts recognised that forced migrant survivors found meaning, comfort and strength in their direct connection with God through prayers and referred to religion as a coping strategy. However, the role of religion and the meaning of 'being religious' varied amongst respondents as they related differently to religion. Many differentiated between formal religion and personal faith and considered the former less helpful than the latter in supporting the mental health of migrants who lost connections with their faith communities and became more distant from an institutionalised religion.

> '*When you lose your hope in everything and anything, just when you think Allah* [God in Arabic] *can do anything for you, just believe in Him . . . gives you big hope . . . the women who suffer from sexual violence, suffer a lot from other people, they find Allah very close to them, and they feel not shy . . . 'I will be with you,' that says Allah . . . It makes their time always full . . . when you read the Qur'an or pray . . . they always try to think about good things and say . . . 'the life will end . . . so this life is not big' . . . '* (Amina, Protection Officer, Türkiye, National NGO)

Faith was also seen as an angle that could help survivors put their lives into perspective and give them hope. Believing in a life after death fostered their patience, while the belief in destiny helped survivors to accept challenges. Some practitioners referred to God as being central in survivors' lives as some counted on divine justice during difficult times, particularly in periods of prolonged non-disclosure:

> '*The religion . . . is like a rope for them to hold on and it gives them peace, it gives them hope, it keeps them stay alive, and it keeps them going . . . this is the point where*

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their faith and belief plays a very important role in holding themselves together . . . Most of the cases are reported after maybe one year . . . or maybe three to five years . . . in this period, they are managing these things on their own . . . and this is the point when they are having faith and are believing in God—"that person will be punished by God . . ." (Urwa, GBV Coordinator, Iraq, FBO-INGO)

While respondents recognised religion was a source of routine and structure that helped survivors stabilise their mental health, they also recognised that religious faith could increase passivity and hinder help-seeking among displaced survivors. They talked about patterns of negative religious coping in which migrants felt punished and abandoned by God:

'Religion, especially prayers are a source of routine, and they have like a stabilising function . . . sometimes increasing passivity or powerlessness and helplessness . . . sometimes there are women who say okay, this is God's will that I was raped and I am in this bad mental health state and then this can cause certain inactivity or learned helplessness . . . 'I will not go to court . . . I will not like to really change my situation because it is like wanted by God" (Monica, GBV and MHPSS Advisor, Lebanon, donor agency)

Inversely, some practitioners observed positive religious coping patterns among forced migrants. In Tunisia, they recalled people on the move drew meaning from their religion by entrusting their lives to God. Their ultimate faith encouraged them to take risks in migrant journeys, sometimes taking desperate and life-threatening decisions:

'*Sometimes we ask them, "you know it's very difficult and dangerous to take the sea, and why do you want to go again? You are a survivor . . ." He said, "no, God is doing everything for me. If I have to die, ok" . . . They say, "some of my friends arrived* [to Europe]*, so I want to be like them, but God will decide if I will arrive, or I will die, and I will do it."'* (Zarna, Psychologist, Tunisia, INGO)

Faith leaders in some countries acted as anti-GBV allies, sometimes facing backlash from their peers for standing against GBV. Some interviewees and online respondents mentioned that local faith leaders and institutions played an important role in supporting GBV awareness-raising, reintegrating survivors into society, countering victim-blaming and stigmatisation, arranging safe spaces and supporting case management.

On the other hand, religion was seen as part of the problem—a driver of women's subordination and violence. Recognising the complexities of religion, some practitioners observed problematic cultural interpretations and selective reading of religious texts that were used to undermine gender inequalities

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and justify women's subordination and perpetrators' abuse, leading to blaming, marginalising and persecuting victims in local communities. Protection personnel of a mainstream agency interviewed in Türkiye reported that certain beliefs of Syrian women concerning women's obligations in marriage were erroneously considered religious, and refugee women could (mis)justify their abuse as a spousal right and their power held over them. Likewise, Sara, a regional VAW advisor with a specialism in health and SGBV from a major international organisation based in West Africa spoke about the manipulative and fragmented use of religious scriptures underpinning social behaviours in Muslim and Christian contexts:

> *'When I worked in Somalia, the women, they taught me a lot . . . if they start talking about certain things in Islam, women must do blah, blah, blah. Where does it say that in the Quran, usually nobody can ever tell you or point out anything . . . The Bible says, you know, women, you must submit to your husband. It's true, but they forget the second part, and the husbands must submit to God. So they conveniently pick out one thing . . . they forget you must love your wife in the way that God loved the church . . . you cannot mistreat her, insult her, beat her, rape her etc. . . . It's the same thing with the Muslims because the Muslim mindset is different than the culture . . . '* (Sara, Regional GBV Specialist, Senegal, IO)

The patriarchal norms and cultural interpretations may dominate religious teachings, as in the above participant's fieldwork encounters. While some claimed faith could help them adapt strong coping strategies, others pointed out that religious beliefs can have a negative impact on the mental health of survivors and more practical assistance was needed. For example, some interviewees recalled how religious beliefs reinforced feelings of guilt and fear of being punished for their sins among women engaged in survival sex in Iraq and earthquake-affected population in Haiti. Religious interpretations and associating hardship with sinning was considered to add to the distress of the displaced:

> *'I realised that it helps sometimes for the guilt that they pray, but in some cases . . . if there is an approach about 'God punished me and because I did these and those things', it can affect badly . . . '* (Zarna, Psychologist, Türkiye, National NGO-INGO)

Key informants also widely reported that faith leaders were influential and important opinion shapers in local communities who could contribute to survivors' self-blaming and feelings of guilt. They were seen as partial and arbitrary, recommending women to reunify families and forgive. In some countries, such as Yemen and Iraq, faith leaders were reported to constitute an informal justice system, which can play an important role for survivors of VAW. Yet, a number of participants recalled how some survivors were forced by their families to marry

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and forgive their perpetrators due to a perceived religious duty. Some practitioners found faith leaders were unfit to engage with social issues without formal education, for example, with some erroneously considering early marriage as a protection mechanism. Some participants feared that religious leaders could misuse religion to condone patriarchal gender norms and power imbalances in local communities:

> '*Most of the time, religious power is misused by religious leaders. Almost all religious leaders are men, and different leaders have their own different interpretations. They always talk about men's rights.*' (Anonymous online respondent, Project Coordinator, NGO)

Therefore, most interview participants were cautious about working with religious leaders. Especially, some respondents spoke about women's rights organisations rejecting to work with religious leaders to protect their feminist standpoints, fearing that they would complicate their achievements and would be complicit in oppressing women.

Religious in(ex)clusion spectrum

Regardless of respondents' views on religion, service providers included and excluded considerations of survivors' faith along their practices in varying ways, with exclusive approach on one end and inclusive approach at the other end of a spectrum with varying degrees of faith in/sensitivity. It is argued that the default humanitarian framework, with its limited faith sensitivity, resulted in overlooking the religious dimension of survivors' experiences and needs in protection responses, thus missing opportunities for resilience building and risk reduction.

Excluding religion

The most commonly reported approach of humanitarian agencies to religion in protection from VAW was its exclusion. Suspicion of religion among humanitarians may reflect an implicit (neo)colonial attitude, eroding faith from public life. Humanitarian interventions, under the guise of neutrality, can reproduce colonial-style domination by exerting influence through socio-economic means. In practice, this often reinforces Western epistemologies, privileging secular frameworks and Western-driven norms in aid delivery while sidelining local knowledge systems and cultural practices (Wilkinson and Tomalin, 2025).

Avoiding religion was the default norm through which most interview respondents navigated the humanitarian sector. Most interviewed humanitarian service

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providers dismissed religion as a relevant factor in their work. Also, half of the online survey respondents reported not accounting for the religious identity of survivors in their work, and a fifth considered their work to be faith-insensitive.

A host of contextual, including institutional and individual, barriers to engaging with religion were reported, often due to personal encounters with religion. Particularly, the interpretations of the humanitarian principles and the lack of guidelines and standards on engaging with religion in the VAW sector led to disregarding religious influences on and the religious needs of survivors. Several respondents spoke about encountering among their colleagues a reluctance to talk about religion and a subsequent religious exclusion in the protection programmes, which had significant consequences for displaced communities. These included, under-serving spiritual and psychosocial needs of survivors, which for some undermined their healing.

A few respondents spoke about their experiences in the headquarters of international organisations and in the wider humanitarian community, which commonly recognised the darker side of religion that was thought to contribute to gendered harm and impediment. Some talked about the trend of relegating religion and faith to a personal sphere, disregarding the communal and institutional dimension of religion and assuming the same for the populations they supported. Non-religious staff, mainly from Western organisations, tended not to pay attention to religious dimensions, and their personal beliefs often manifested in their organisations:

> '*. . . this is a Western European organisation, so most colleagues are not very religious . . . they are sceptical towards religion, they say . . . religion is potentially harmful . . . religion is not on their mind because they're not religious themselves.*' (Mark, Head of Programme, Lesotho, IO)

Sceptical attitudes to religion in the humanitarian infrastructure likely indicated varying levels of bias against local religious beliefs and inherent coping strategies. Others spoke about the 'tarnished image' of religion, influenced by harmful ideologies and subsequent stigmatisation that drew public attention to the negative side of religion:

> '*We're living in an era where religion is only promoting the extremist part. There is a need to go back to the religion itself and the positive aspects of the religion to show what are the common ground resources of the individual religion to look at it as a development of the human being and not something that is putting the human being backward . . .* ' (Noah, Humanitarian Coordinator, Türkiye, IO)

The institutional insensitivity to, and binary views of staff on, religion enabled religious exclusion in humanitarian protection responses. The analysis herein

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indicates a level of precaution and personal influences rendering religious avoidance and exclusion in protection responses. Religion is sometimes portrayed as destructive, which is congruent with Khalaf-Elledge (2020), who found that development practitioners have commonly operated with an 'orientalist mindset', perceiving religion as risky and backward. Her analysis points out that accounting for religion depends on individual discretion and '*an excessive amount of caution towards religion that transcends a passive religion-blindness*' (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020: 663).

The default approach to religion in the humanitarian sector meant that secularisation processes influenced the interpretations of humanitarian principles. For example, Mary, a GBV specialist, who formerly worked for a major international humanitarian agency, recalled how they were trained to avoid religion in GBV case management in order to uphold objectivity. Although she witnessed survivors accepting domestic violence as destiny in their religious faith, she was instructed not to respond to their religious beliefs. In her experience, faith insensitivity ignored negative religious coping among survivors, which perpetuated tolerance of abuse and undermined their healing:

> '*… there was much resistance to talking about religion … I was involved in some of the case management training … and one of the trainers … said, 'so if anyone brings up religion, any of the women or they say, or they try to talk about their faith, and using that to talk about violence … you can't engage with that. And you just have to try and change the subject or don't ever allow faith to come up in your case management sessions' … so many women had this idea that … violence … was … naseeb* [destiny] *… so they* [women] *were left sort of hanging because the organisation was trying to be objective … they invested into this almost very like secular approach, quite divorced from people's actual experiences …* ' (Mary, GBV Coordinator, INGO)

Faith-excluding organisational policies and practices ignored survivors' religious beliefs in a bid to remain impartial. The enforcement of a faith-exclusive interpretation of impartiality as a humanitarian principle, and associating objectivity with religious exclusion, in turn, underserved survivors who were religious—leaving them with unresolved spiritual struggles, as discussed in Chapter 5. For example, several survivors (cf. Figure 5.6.) relied on religious coping but were unable to practice their religion because of restricted access to religious scriptures and lack of pastoral/spiritual care. The privatisation of religious beliefs and practices meant the spiritual tensions of survivors remained unresolved, with some turning to negative religious coping mechanisms, such as blaming themselves, questioning God and believing they were punished by God (Pertek, 2022).

The humanitarian default norms of religious avoidance influenced smaller humanitarian organisations, in particular, to avoid and disassociate themselves

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from religion in order to prove adherence to their humanitarian mandate. Some emphasised the distinction between their organisational policies and personal views concerning religion in crisis. For instance, given geopolitical sensitivities, two respondents from Syrian humanitarian organisations in Türkiye rejected the idea of accounting for religion in their MHPSS work:

> '*… as a religion, we can't talk about this issue in general in the work the organisation does… They try to avoid this point because we want to deal with all the people, maybe people who don't have any religion … we create scientific therapies …* '
> (Omar, Protection Officer, Türkiye, national NGO)

Another Syrian NGO operating at the Turkish border was explicit about their tendency to avoid topics that may incite religious sensitivities. Engaging with religion was considered to carry potential risks undermining survivors' ability to cope and thought that secular approaches to mental health support were harmless, as mentioned by Omar, a coordinator of one Syrian-led humanitarian organisation. Being responsible for the MHPSS and GBV response for Syrians, he believed that mixing religion with humanitarian work could harm beneficiaries or humanitarian workers because of perceived risks of engaging with religion in GBV response. Omar considered religion to be a set of *halal and haram* instructions, unhelpful in supporting survivors. He was concerned about the ideological differences between therapists and clients of different religious affiliations, so he deemed that bringing religion to therapies risked infringing personal belief system, possibly with a therapist imposing 'faulty' religious beliefs. Thus, for Omar secular approach was most appropriate for his work. Similarly, reflecting on his previous experience of engaging imams in GBV prevention programmes through sermons on women's rights and religious law, he doubted a faith-based approach to prevent GBV would be effective. Reinforced by the humanitarian norms of religious avoidance, several respondents, similar to Omar, argued for the neutrality of humanitarian responses by referring to the sectoral MHPSS and GBV guidelines.

A few respondents with international roles reported that the default humanitarian framework, driven by the Western humanitarians, was averse to religion as part of efforts to protect humanitarian principles, which were assumed to be transmitters of independency while religious engagement was seen as potentially breaching this independency (Wilkinson and Tomalin, 2025). Subsequently, the enacted humanitarian principles inadvertently enabled religious exclusion. Half of the survey respondents agreed, to varying degrees (mean 3.00, in a scale from one meaning 'very little' to five meaning 'very much', Appendix 10) that the integration of religion into VAW responses risked humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.[1] The default framework of the humanitarian system,

[1] Four agreed very much, four agreed much, seven agreed a bit, six a little and three very little that the integration of religion into VAW responses risked humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

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with rather binary interpretations of the humanitarian principles excluding religion, contributed to creating an environment in which agencies were expected to disengage with religion, creating insensitivities around the diverse worldviews of the populations they supported.

While neutrality and impartiality, in theory, require respect for difference and sensitivity to different needs, including religious needs, meeting such standards depends on the subjective interpretation and personal discretion of staff. For instance, efforts of humanitarian practitioners in Tunisia to ensure equal treatment of all religious groups resulted in religious exclusion. A few interviewees talked about being 'indifferent' to the religion of migrants, accepting and respecting people of all faiths and none, while not taking notice of migrants' religious identity. Such indifference often resulted in a 'one size fits all' approach in service provision to different religious groups, which led to privatising and overlooking the specific religious needs of certain migrant groups. For example, migrant shelters in Medenine lacked places to pray. In such circumstances, associating neutrality while disregarding survivors' religious identity led to under-serving survivors.

The absence of guidelines and standards around religion also drove religious exclusion in the sector. Some respondents recalled that none of the multiple VAW/GBV guidelines and trainings in the humanitarian settings tackled religion and spirituality. Only one religious reference was mentioned in the staff care section in the World Health Organisation's GBV case management guidelines. Therefore, the organisations, by default, were not expected to engage with religious dimensions, nor were they held to account for religious exclusion in their work. Sara with twenty years of experience in the sector recalled:

> *'None of these guidelines have anything to deal with religion or spirituality … it is something I always found completely missing … in the humanitarian community, there is almost like aversion to anything with religion. It is almost like the humanitarian mentality ….'* (Sara, Regional GBV Specialist, Senegal, IO)

Privatisation of religion through attitudes embodied by the protection practitioners devalued the importance of religious expressions in displaced people's lives, while humanitarians' deeply rooted beliefs and a perceived primacy of secular values and materialist approach imposed what development and human needs should be (Wilkinson, 2018). Nearly null references to religion in VAW/GBV guidelines (IASC, 2015) enable marginalising survivors' religious needs and re-delegating faith to the personal sphere.

Similarly, the adversarial attitudes to religion that permeated the sector were reflected in an online survey, in which respondents rated the GBV guidelines semi-sensitive to religion with average 4.13 on a scale of 0–10 (0-insensitive/10-sensitive). The use of terminologies such as religion, faith and spirituality also played a role, as they scored differently in the survey. Respondents rated religion as

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Table 6.1 Means of online participants' engagement with religion

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Count
Q1: On a scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much) which of the following are accounted for in your work as factors shaping people's vulnerability to VAW?						
1	Religion	1	5	3.42	1.18	24
2	Faith	1	5	2.50	1.29	24
3	Spirituality	1	5	2.29	1.23	24
Q2: On a scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much) which of the following are accounted for in your work as factors shaping people's resilience and coping?						
1	Religion	1	5	3.13	1.33	24
2	Faith	1	5	3.13	1.54	24
3	Spirituality	1	5	2.63	1.35	24

more likely a factor in vulnerability to VAW (Table 6.1) than faith and spirituality. Faith and religion were considered more often as coping and healing factors than spirituality. Such variations indicated different values attached to religion, faith and spirituality, signalling differences in approaching each of these terms in practice, including a potential bias against religion as a vulnerability factor and a slight marginalisation of spirituality as a coping/healing resource. Faith was least rated as a vulnerability factor and greatest coping/healing factor, signalling its preferential framing as 'faith' rather than 'religion' in humanitarian discourse.

Congruently to Wilkinson (2018: 466), who found development practitioners can work with faith, but religion is more problematic, the findings presented in this chapter indicate that 'faith' is indeed a more favourable term among practitioners who considered it less risky and a greater coping resource than religion. In other words, faith as personal and non-institutionalised, is likely more acceptable in the public domain than institutionalised religion. Moreover, not working with religion was sometimes justified on the basis of promoting the equal treatment of people (Tunisia case), regardless of their religious affiliations, which in practice meant sometimes overlooking religious discrimination against some groups of migrants.

Consequences of religious exclusion

The lack of monitoring for religious discrimination in North African migration contexts has meant that risks faced by certain groups remained unaddressed. For example, shelters without prayer spaces or access to religious accessories undermined survivors' ability to regulate emotions through faith practices, exacerbating trauma and feelings of isolation. Without spiritual care, some survivors experienced spiritual distress, guilt or negative religious coping (e.g., feeling punished by God), which could worsen mental health outcomes (see Chapter 5 this volume). In Tunisia, some Christian women reported going months without attending church or receiving spiritual support.

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GBV case management protocols that prohibited discussing faith—even when survivors framed their experiences through religious beliefs—left spiritual struggles unresolved. Survivors who interpret violence as 'destiny' or divine punishment may remain passive and avoid seeking help, perpetuating cycles of abuse. Similarly, mindfulness or Western therapeutic models offered in refugee programs may conflict with survivors' faith-based coping preferences (such as prayer or scripture reading). As a result, survivors may disengage from services perceived as culturally or spiritually irrelevant, reducing program effectiveness.

Moreover, programs that avoid working with faith leaders miss influential actors who could challenge harmful norms and promote gender equality within religious frameworks. This exclusion not only limits opportunities for transformative change but also reinforces the perception of humanitarian interventions as culturally disconnected. I now move on to consider the opposite end of the spectrum.

Including religion

Most survey respondents worked with religion in some way, including the considerations of religious dimension in their contexts with varying degrees of religious sensitivity, using pragmatic and instrumental lens, as illustrated below. Only a minority of interviewed practitioners explicitly accounted for religion in their work. A third of respondents considered their protection work to be faith sensitive, and another third believed it to be faith-sensitive 'sometimes when possible'. I begin with an analysis of the 'instrumentalist approach' whereby religion was used strategically by practitioners and the 'pragmatic approach' in which they sought to achieve practical outcomes by working with religious dimensions. Some organisations demonstrated a 'mixed' approach where some branches included, and other branches excluded religious considerations, illustrating religious in(ex)clusion phenomenon in humanitarian work.

Instrumentalist approach

Despite high levels of religious scepticism, some respondents were compelled to engage with religion, particularly through faith leaders, in contexts in which the success of their operations depended upon their approval. Such an approach is labelled here as 'instrumentalist' and describes these respondents who preferred to avoid religion but engaged with it as a means to achieve their operational goals in religious contexts, as identified in other studies (Ager and Ager, 2015; Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011).

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In some cases, religion was thought to be incorporated into programmes with an aim to change faith leaders' perspectives on gender and power issues, instead of genuinely engaging with them for collaboration. Although several respondents talked about mobilising faith leaders to undertake anti-VAW/GBV advocacy (for example, in Iraq, Syria, Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Zambia), to sensitise and encourage behavioural change in local communities, in other cases, faith leaders were seen as informal authorisers of their projects:

> '*In many organisations, faith leaders are just seen as … the gatekeepers … to work in these communities, we need to talk to them and get their approval … So it's … an instrumentalist way of engaging with faith leaders like in order to do what we want to do, we need to get their support, rather than necessarily seeing them as … quite powerful and influential actors who in themselves can bring about social change … even for organisations that do engage faith leaders, it's sometimes done in a quite a paternalistic patronising way … '* (Ayat, VAW Coordinator, INGO)

The superficial take on religious engagement was observed by several respondents who intimated that Western organisations used religious leaders to convey anti-VAW messages, and overlooked their potential to tackle VAW from within their own worldviews and resources. Some agencies were described as intending first to change faith leaders and then use them to influence wider communities:

> '*… the GBV programme people perceive the religious element just very superficially … let's use the religious leaders to basically convey our message as opposed to actually having a dialogue … but it's just … ramming a message down their throats without taking into consideration their own worldview … I find it very preachy … the top-down … as opposed to … let's work with them within their own framework … You need … Muslim scholars, or … Christian scholars … depending on the religious context, to actually teach … using their own text … '* (Sara, Regional GBV Specialist, Senegal, IO)

In the view of some respondents, the instrumentalist approach of humanitarians imposed other worldviews, undermining opportunities for more profound and transformative engagement with faith leaders perceived to be an 'obstacle needing fixing'. Moreover, some protection practitioners approached religion in an opportunistic manner with an interest-based religious engagement and engagement out of necessity in religious contexts in which faith communities were indispensable partners. A few spoke about avoiding religion but being compelled by circumstances to work with religious dynamics. For example, Alexander from a Danish INGO preferred to avoid religion but was required to work with religion in certain under-resourced contexts. As a head of mission and protection expert in multiple conflict and scarcest settings, he built relationships with and relied on, religious actors often as the only available resources to facilitate humanitarian protection.

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Despite personally believing that institutional religion was not helpful in dealing with trauma, Alexander found that religious actors (priests, imams, heads of religious schools) usually keenly supported his operations by providing safe housing, assessment and referrals of survivors (as in Yemen).

Concerning the role of religious leaders in delivering training for social workers, he said that '*… they are a centre of authority, you can always use to deliver those trainings if they agree with them …* '. Also, in humanitarian settings with a shortage of qualified personnel, out of necessity, Alexander resorted to hiring qualified protection personnel linked to the church (e.g. in Tanzania) and offered clients a choice of using their or others' services unconnected to the church. He considered religion rather a challenge than an asset and mistrusted religious leaders because he encountered their reactions unforeseeable in different incidents, including injustice caused to child survivors of rape. Therefore, he used to train protection personnel to not rely on religious beliefs but supported survivors' choices if they wished a religious figure to be part of their recovery plan, saying: '*We don't encourage it, we don't discourage it*'.

Alexander also talked about the importance of collecting religion-disaggregated data from the populations they supported to monitor intersectional vulnerabilities. As the only organisation in the Tunisian operation, he considered disaggregating data by religion due to the increased vulnerabilities of non-Muslim migrants in southern Tunisia:

> '*In most countries, we do not* [disaggregate beneficiaries' data by religion]. *I will say here in Tunisia, we will eventually, it depends on how the social workers will receive this … We will disaggregate here because there is an increased risk for non-Muslims in the south of Tunisia … the kind of information you collect has to reflect the dangers and threats and risks people face …* ' (Alexander, Head of Mission, Tunisia, INGO)

Accounting for religion in humanitarian data collection could potentially help mitigate the risks of violence associated with religion. Monitoring incidents of religious discrimination and religious persecution can help inform interventions to address interpersonal and community violence and encourage victims to seek help.

Similarly, some talked about working with religious actors to change social norms at different levels. As part of an integrated approach, engaging with FBOs was integral to VAW prevention, as was the ability to access existing services in situ, many of which were provided by FBOs. For example, one online respondent worked with religious leaders, as a tool, to engage men and boys in GBV prevention.

> *'Engagement of men and boys is one of the important and key elements for the prevention and mitigation of GBV. For this, religious and faith leaders are an effective*

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tool. But before utilizing them as an agent of change, we have to understand the dynamics … ' (Anonymous online respondent, international FBO, Iraq)

Some organisations worked with leading FBOs, who acted as their brokers in relations with faith leaders, for instance, by setting up advisory groups with other FBOs. Indirect cooperation with religious actors enabled secular agencies to maintain neutrality and the secular nature of their work, subsequently shaping the top-down relations between government organisations and faith-based INGOs:

'*We are different from an international NGO … and we are also different from especially a faith-based international NGO, in the sense that we are per se a secular organisation, number one; number two, we are a neutral organisation, our role is to be advisors. So, we always have the advantage … we don't have any vested interests of our own.*' (Mark, Head of Programme, Lesotho, IO)

Indeed, reclaiming neutrality and engaging with religious complexities through a broker, was part of the Western agencies' strategy to engage with religion for social change, as similarly argued by Tomalin (2020). Yet, two respondents from leading humanitarian IOs, who spoke about working with FBOs out of necessity in under-resourced settings, also raised concerns around FBOs' reproductive health policies (e.g. on abortion post-rape) and implicit evangelical rhetoric, which discouraged them from working with these actors.

Pragmatic approach

Working with religion was often pragmatic in reaction to survivors' needs and contextual analysis and meant adopting different methodologies, policies and guidelines. The level of religious inclusion depended on staff who were guided by their religious experiences and beliefs. Some accounted for religion as part of cultural sensitivity and the humanitarian localisation agenda.

MHPSS practitioners accounted for religion mainly in their psychosocial activities when their clients wanted to talk about religion. They built on the survivor-centred, strength-based and resource-orientation approaches, which aimed to identify survivors' coping mechanisms and inherent resources, including those related to faith and religion:

'If the survivor considers faith and religion as important for her and she wants those elements to be part of her recovery action plan, then that's part of the survivor-centred approach. However, a survivor should not be encouraged or pushed to focus on religion or faith … ' (Anonymous online respondent, GBV Manager, international NGO, MENA)

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Following the MHPSS guidelines, several practitioners typically first asked their clients about their coping strategies, to be able to identify and strengthen their coping abilities. Therapists did not ask about religion directly, but some reported integrating it into their therapies when survivors requested this. This indirect approach sometimes led psychologists to misconceive their clients' religious affiliation when working with migrants from mixed religious groups based on their appearance. Given the risks of 'spiritual struggles', several respondents considered that religion should not be involved in psychotherapies to avoid triggering psychological distress. Some practitioners did not consider the religion of survivors to be important during therapeutic support.

> *'I don't bring up the religion … that time it was the first time I knew that she is Christian … most of them cover their head and after you will find out that they are not Muslim … I don't see it as important as much, only if a person is in need … sometimes they will tell you that I am punished by God … With some psychological troubles, you cannot bring religion because it will make the person feel worse.*' (Zarna, Psychologist, Tunisia, INGO)

Although psychosocial and religious needs intersect (Williamson and Robinson, 2006), the respondent above and online respondents attributed slightly greater importance to psychosocial needs compared to religious, faith and spiritual needs, whilst some recognised the connection between all these needs. As shared in Table 6.1., in a scale from one ('very little') to five ('very much') respondents rated the importance of accounting for psychosocial needs to a higher degree (mean 4.88) than the importance of accounting for survivors' religious, faith and spiritual needs (mean 4.13). Yet, in the same scale, online respondents, on average, agreed (mean 4.08) that the psychosocial needs and religious/faith/spiritual needs of survivors were connected, which indicates a relative awareness of the intersection between multidimensional domains of wellbeing.

Moreover, online survey respondents were more likely to consider that religion, faith and/or spirituality can support survivors' coping and healing (mean 4.08) than hinder them (mean 2.96) (Appendix 10). Such data indicate that most online respondents recognised to some degree the role of the religious functions in the resilience and recovery of victims, although to varying degrees. In practice, humanitarian practitioners in Tunisia and Türkiye rarely acknowledged the spiritual dimension of wellbeing and the religious coping of forced migrants, missing opportunities to strengthen their existing coping mechanisms. A third of online respondents used religious, faith or spiritual resources to support survivors' resilience, healing and coping, a third 'did not use these at all' and another third 'used these sometimes', for example, when faith leaders supported their response to VAW (for instance, by referring survivors to professional services) and prevention (e.g. dismantling religious misconceptions and influencing behavioural change).

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In contrast to smaller NGOs in Türkiye, that excluded religion, as mentioned in an earlier section, two respondents representing a large international organisation with a specialism in migration in Türkiye confidently spoke about the importance of accounting for religion in refugee responses as part of their humanitarian mandate and responsibility to contextualise interventions:

> '*… you have to be respectful, and you have to pay attention to it* [religious perspective]*, if it helps, if my client says she reads Qur'an, and it helps her, I support it … in every session, I ask 'Do you read? How was it? Do you feel better? How did it help you?' … because nobody can know what's good, better for them, other than themselves …* ' (Asiya, Psychologist and Team Leader, Türkiye, IO)

Interestingly, self-declared faith-sensitivity in large organisations was inspired by the same humanitarian standards and MHPSS guidelines that other practitioners in smaller organisations interpreted to justify avoiding religion. Such divergence in approaching religion demonstrates that MHPSS guidelines, which promoted cultural contextualisation, were differently interpreted and remained subject to service providers' discretion and positionality. Large IOs, often as donor and capacity-building agencies, were more likely to account for religion, referring to humanitarian standards and guidelines recommending cultural and contextual adaptation. Smaller organisations, as donor-dependent, were more likely to interpret humanitarian standards in ways that restrained their religious engagement in order to prove themselves worthy and independent in the humanitarian community.

Similarly, respondents working in large international organisations in Lebanon, Iraq and Pakistan worked with religion when initiated by survivors. However, sometimes contextual and structural barriers, such as geopolitical and religious dynamics, hindered religious engagement. Several respondents felt unable to navigate through religious complexities, differences of opinion between sects, and multiple interpretations. To manage religious engagement, some talked about using specific methodologies and tools, such as resource mapping, stakeholder and religious actors mapping, including traditional healers and identifying practices used by refugee communities (for instance, prayers, black magic and *ruqyah,* the exorcism of invisible spirits).

For instance, Saida, a GBV coordinator from a mainstream INGO with a specialism in health in Pakistan, talked about the importance of operationalising religion in their work in the Afghan refugee settlements and also confronting major structural limitations. First, to contextualise her organisational GBV interventions, she mapped out culturally available resources to sensitively adapt their strategies, trainings and activities to an Afghan culture. The resource mapping identified a range of cultural resources available for GBV mitigation, including madrassas, a dispute resolution community (*shura*) and an elderly committee

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operating as an informal justice system to which some survivors resorted for justice. She said that her organisation was not expected to engage with religion by local communities as they operated in a militant context. Also, the organisation's previous engagement in religious schools (madrassas) engendered risks to local staff and was halted. In therapies, however, her clients wished to speak about religion. She considered that religion was reserved for the discussion of religious leaders, who often condoned survivors' marriages with perpetrators, child marriage and *sorah* (giving a girl away to settle tribal disputes). Religious leaders fuelled community backlash against INGO, which Saida worked for, deterring refugee women from attending project activities, as they considered them westernised. Such opposition to humanitarian organisations reflects more than religious conservatism and resistance from religious leaders. Intertwined with historical and political legacies of colonialism, many communities perceive foreign aid as a vehicle for cultural domination, fearing that externally funded programs will impose Western norms. Such concerns are prevalent especially when interventions prioritise liberal gender agendas without adequate contextualisation, reinforcing narratives of cultural imperialism. Amid broader anxieties about neocolonial influence rather than theology alone, religion offers symbolic language for asserting sovereignty and protecting social fabrics perceived as under threat. Indeed, faith-based resistance is frequently a proxy for anti-colonial sentiment. Aiming to mitigate such negative influences, the organisation reacted with the development of training modules on engaging with religious leaders to increase organisational capacities to engage with the blurred cultural, social and religious influences condoning VAWG. Therefore, Saida avoided confrontation and discussing religion, mitigating against potential misunderstanding among gatekeepers and local communities.

Stakeholder mapping activities allowed service providers to understand their context better and plan their projects, for instance, some engaged religious actors in VAW/GBV and MHPSS training. Interview participants also talked about the codes of conduct, context analysis and 'do no harm' principles as enablers of effective religious engagement:

> '*… we are … trying to take 'do no harm' analysis pretty seriously … to analyse the role of different religious actors and how far they are rather contributing to conflict and fragmentation and oppression and how far they are rather helpful … when we are working with religion in any form, we have to look at whether religion, in this case, is rather a connector or divider …* ' (Monica, GBV and MHPSS Advisor, Lebanon, IO)

Finally, two interviewees from a Western government donor agency spoke about having an organisational policy on religious engagement which allowed them flexibility in engaging with religious actors in their fieldwork. For instance, one

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German international organisation worked with religious leaders to convince Yazidi communities to accept survivors of sexual slavery by an armed group and their children who had been born in captivity. A small number of interview participants spoke about the transformational approach to religion, as discussed next.

Transformational approach

The transformational approach meant an intentional religious engagement to address VAW in forced migration. A few interview respondents worked proactively with religious dimensions through religious leaders in VAW prevention and response, psychosocial activities and local advocacy to transform discriminatory gender relations. A third of key informants and a fifth of survey respondents online 'accounted for' the religious identity of survivors they supported, and a fourth of online respondents did so 'sometimes when possible'.

Several online survey respondents from different countries used faith-sensitive methodologies in programming and developed materials about VAW with an integrated faith perspective for survivors and FBOs. Also, some therapists used their initiative to involve religious perspectives, so as to tailor MHPSS interventions to their clients who were religious. Some were training case workers in the spiritual needs of survivors, for example in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to account for faith in trauma recovery.

Urwa, a GBV coordinator of an international FBO in Iraq interviewed online, described how she worked with religion in multi-faith settings, providing support to survivors by drawing on their religion and mobilising inter-faith social cohesion building. Overseeing safe spaces for internally displaced women in Iraq, she found faith was an important asset of ethnically diverse displaced groups for healing and coping. Amid the geo-political, ethno-religious and socio-economic sensitivities post-conflict, together with her team, she deployed culturally appropriate psycho-social support adapted to different communities. Using what she described as an intersectional approach, she aimed to ensure the mitigation strategies were responsive to ethnic identities, disabilities and other exclusion factors, but her project often depended on donors who were less concerned about religious sensitivity. Her organisation engaged ethnic leaders from different sects in GBV sensitisation. A multi-faith training involved Muslim Sunni, Shia-Arab, Turkman, Kurd, Christian, Yazidi and Karki leaders and, with help of skilled trainers, sensibly explored commonalities between different faiths, while jointly developing anti-GBV messages and action plans in their congregations. The project supported social cohesion and inter-faith dialogue but unexpectedly ceased when a donor agency reduced funding. Her FBO preferred not to be labelled as religious due to the reputational risks in humanitarian response led by Western agencies

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post-conflict in Iraq, where the common interpretation of impartiality required a non-association with religion. The inter-agency GBV cluster meetings (mainly attended by expats) did not discuss religion, while international organisations, often donors, were not interested in looking at religion in IDP responses, despite the multi-religious context. Nonetheless, Urwa's FBO inspired by their combined faith and humanitarian values, included a faith perspective in psycho-social activities when supporting women belonging to the same ethnic group as social workers in individual and awareness-raising sessions, but not in larger and multi-ethnic groups due to the contextual sensitivities. For instance, they would support survivors' religious meaning-making and connecting with themselves to express their feelings.

> '*Sometimes it's having faith and having hope in God and faith and everything that works a lot. So, I believe that this is one of the important factors and our social workers and case management officers use it properly.*' (Urwa, Protection Manager, international FBO, Iraq)

Respondents online worked with community leaders as part of VAW prevention initiatives. They developed faith-inclusive curricula and community transformation methodologies to train faith leaders and faith communities to promote gender equality and combat violence against women, for example, by producing handbooks for survivors of domestic abuse from a faith perspective. Specific methodologies mentioned by online respondents included 'SASA! Faith' by Raising Voices, 'Channels of Hope' for Gender by World Vision and 'Transforming Masculinities' by Tearfund. Other faith-sensitive interventions, for example, included involving faith leaders to 'change attitudes and behaviours around female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and dispel myths of FGM/C being promoted in religious texts'. Some applied faith sensitivity as part of their localisation efforts:

> '*… Our work is always done within the local context, which does include religious aspects. We can't convene any activities without religious aspects.*' (Anonymous online respondent, Protection Coordinator, INGO)

In the context of migration routes in Tunisia, a humanitarian organisation offering reception for many Christian forced migrants sporadically arranged for visits from pastors from other cities and facilitated space for their prayers.

> '*… we take care of any religion, for the Christian or Protestant, if they want to make a prayer … So if they want and they are Muslim … they are free, there are a lot of mosques … Some people have a religious day … we give them a room … Also we help them if there is a religious event for their celebration … Sometimes we also receive*

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a pastor. They call us and ask if it's possible.' (Uthman, Chair, Tunisia, National NGO)

The same organisation in Tunisia also provided dignified burials of migrant bodies washed ashore, following faith-sensitive procedures for different religions. For example, volunteers and local faith communities in Zarzis cooperated with a pastor to arrange a cemetery for unknown refugees.

Mixed approach: Religious in(ex)clusion

Finally, a mixed, multiple-edged approach to religion is discussed, which I call 'religious in(ex)clusion' which refers to a parallel inclusion and exclusion of religion and faith in the humanitarian sector. Such a mixed approach was common, first in organisations when personal and organisational stances on religion were misaligned, and second in instances when accounting for religion varied between different branches of the same organisation. Some worked in settings in which service providers engaged with religion reluctantly, demonstrating that the privatisation of religion in the humanitarian system can still manifest in religious inclusion by individual staff. For instance, respondents from Turkish and Tunisian missions of the same international organisation specialised in migration approached religion differently. Operations in Türkiye aimed to adapt and contextualise their interventions with sensitivity to the culture and religion of migrants to provide holistic support. Representatives talked about conducting comprehensive assessments inclusive of their culture, health and religion to ensure adequate response:

'*… our approach to the psychosocial support is to provide holistic and comprehensive support, taking into consideration individual, the biophysical aspects of people, their socio-economic profile and their cultural and anthropological profile … we cannot separate it from religion that's why … our interventions are holistic and the religion plays a part of them …* ' (Selina, Emergency Coordinator & Psychosocial Officer, Türkiye, IO)

Further, the Turkish branch co-produced research on the mental health of the Syrian population and worked on the PSS guidelines to inform their interventions. Also, they considered engaging religious and traditional healers in their mental health and resilience programmes with local communities and recognised the prominent role that faith played in psychological first aid during the crisis. In Ramadan, the Turkish local branches organised *Iftars* (fast breaking meals) for thousands of refugees, taking the distribution of meals as an opportunity to

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strengthen social cohesion and support the healing of refugees through religious practice.

However, the above faith-sensitivity of a Turkish branch was not reflected in the Tunisian branch, demonstrating that approaches to working with religion varied according to context. In southern Tunisia migrants' religious needs were largely disregarded—for example *Iftars* were not provided during Ramadan, nor were religious needs taken into account, such as circumcision of boys. As a result, barriers to accessing religious facilities and religious practices were exacerbated for migrants in Tunisia. For instance, their requests to visit places of worship were rarely considered. Only occasional visits to the church of one Christian affiliation 100 km away in Djerba were arranged for newly arrived Christian migrants, neglecting the needs of migrants of other Christian affiliations. Malak, a protection officer, who worked for Tunisian branch of the leading international organisation specialised in migration aimed to address holistic needs of migrants. To facilitate access to safe circumcision for boys and *iftars,* she contacted local organisations and mosques in a personal capacity outside of her work. In this case, working with religion was possible (and needed) even in an organisational system excluding religion.

Malak also recalled her experience of deploying a faith narrative to console one severely distressed migrant during a rigid reception screening procedure. The standard vulnerability screening procedure did not identify migrants' religion in efforts to ensure the same treatment for all migrants, as stated earlier in this chapter, while disregarding potential religious vulnerabilities and assuming religious affiliation based on a migrant's (sometimes misleading) appearance. Despite religious exclusion operating in Malak's organisation, she drew on religious faith to help some migrants reappraise their situations. The following extract illustrates how seeing the distress of a migrant, Malak listened to her and helped her mitigate self-blame by finding a new meaning of her heroism:

> *'I was obliged to ask her many questions so she remembers her story and then she started crying and said 'because I saved that boy this happened to me otherwise I would be in Italy' … her request was rejected by …* [organisation handling asylum cases] *… she went to Libya … bad things happened to her* [sexual trafficking] *… she was repeating because I saved his life, this happened to me. I told her 'but you're Muslim and I think that this is the best thing that you have ever done* [saving a life]*'. I reminded her of what is mentioned in our religion concerning this and what she has done, this is very great, so she doesn't have to blame herself for doing good things … she said 'Yeah, you are right'. She started to see things differently … religion in giving importance to life of migrants can help a lot, but unfortunately, they* [humanitarian agencies] *are not implementing it … they feel afraid of this issue … they did not consider this is very important for migrants and they want to avoid it … '* (Malak, Protection Officer, Tunisia, IO)

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The above scenario shows that religious inclusion in humanitarian protection work depends on the agency of an individual staff member. Religion continues to be read through an individual experience in humanitarianism and public life, rather than being systematically integrated as a socio-political factor. Given this protection worker from Tunisia recognised the importance of religion in migrants' lives—that is in relation to their identity and overall sense of being (as integral to their meaning-making), she managed to use this to comfort survivors with a faith rationale, helping them to reframe her past. Yet, the organisation she worked for continued to avoid religion and thus excluded faith-related medical and cultural needs.

Conversely, faith inclusion in organisations can be undermined by staff who exclude religion, even in organisations relatively sensitive to faith. For example, in another case, a Turkish branch of a humanitarian INGO adopted a faith-sensitive approach by providing a prayer room in urban migrant centres and, upon women's request, offered refugee women-led Qur'anic classes. Also, alongside vocational training and psychosocial activities, the organisation provided mindfulness sessions, which Syrian women resisted and wished not to participate, as they preferred to focus on worship practices which substituted for them mindfulness activities. In reaction to this resistance, a protection officer I interviewed concluded that religion impeded refugee women's participation in mindfulness sessions without critical reflection on women's needs and whether mindfulness sessions were best fitting for religious women.

In conclusion, the individual agency of staff facilitated and constrained religious inclusion and exclusion in protection programmes for displaced populations, ultimately determining whether survivors' spiritual needs were met or overlooked. This finding indicates that religion within humanitarianism—and in broader public life—continues to be interpreted based on individual experiences rather than systematically addressed as a socio-political factor.

Religious in(ex)clusion by humanitarian default

This chapter examined the ways in which humanitarian practitioners both exclude and include the religious dimension of survivors' experiences, showing that religious inclusion could be embedded in organisations excluding religion and vice versa. It points out that religious engagement in humanitarianism is inconsistent and often depends on individual agency and contextual factors rather than systematic policy. This reflects the concept of *religious in(ex)clusion*—where inclusion and exclusion coexist within the same system, emphasising that engagement with religion still depends on the individual experience of religion in the humanitarian system excluding religion by default. By humanitarian default, I refer to the design,

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operational standards and principles, which may avoid and marginalise religion of populations it aims to serve, often due to the legacy of the (neo)colonial attitude to religion among humanitarians.

The study reconfirms previous studies reporting on the marginal place of religion in the broader modern humanitarian system (Ager and Ager, 2011; Wilkinson, 2018). Reflecting Ager's and Ager's (2015) categorisation of secular impacts on religion as instrumentalisation, privatisation and marginalisation, this chapter illustrated all these aspects in the context of VAW response in displacement contexts. However, the chapter contributes new empirical evidence on religious inclusion and exclusion in protection from VAW, through a new concept—religious in(ex)clusion spectrum pointing that humanitarians engage with religion in various ways within a wider system favouring religious exclusion. Clearly, the default humanitarian framework led to marginalising the religious dimensions of survivors' experiences, including their religious needs interconnected with psycho-social needs.

Humanitarian practitioners negotiated the challenges and benefits of engaging with religious actors (Wilkinson, 2018) across religious in(ex)clusion spectrum, which also highlights the issue of power in the secular-religious dynamics between international organisations and local NGOs. Power imbalances influenced the ways in which different organisations were expected to interact with religious issues or interpret humanitarian principles, enabling or disabling constructive religious engagement. International agencies, often acting as donor and capacity-building agencies, were more likely to account for religion by making references to humanitarian standards, while smaller NGOs were more likely to refrain from religious engagement to prove themselves truly humanitarian and independent. Notably, in current geopolitical sensitivities, in particular the 'War on Terror' and restrictions posed on Muslim charitable organisations, some organisations strategically avoid engagement perceived as religious to ensure continuity of funding. Meantime, some FBOs, in turn, strive to comply with humanitarian principles as expression of their faith (Salek, 2016; Wilkinson and Tomalin, 2025). Arguably, international organisations have more space than smaller NGOs for manoeuvring interpreting humanitarian principles and capacities for adopting faith sensitivity. In conclusion, while the default secular humanitarian framework excluded religious considerations in VAW interventions, the continued negotiations of how organisations engaged with religion and the agency of the personnel engaging with religious actors enabled, at times, religious inclusion based on the needs of displaced survivors.

Shifting humanitarian landscape may create space for new initiatives to engage with religious actors to tap into life-saving resources to sustain protection services. Further research might examine how far-right influences shift policy on religion, protection and displacement and the role of religious identity and resources in framing and addressing protection gaps under geopolitical strain.

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7

Towards an intersectional socioecology of protection

Introduction

This chapter synthesises the book's findings to draw out the protection implications for policy and practice. The preceding analysis has shown that religious influences across the spiral continuum of violence against women (VAW) are profound—generating both the spiritual capital that supports women's resilience, and spiritual suffering that demands cross-sectoral responses spanning the very systems it disrupts. Building on this, the chapter examines how these dynamics might reshape protection approaches. As Goździak and Shandy note, 'the spiritual context of human suffering should provide the foundation for understanding and responding to the suffering of refugees' (2002: 131).

Taken together, women's narratives reveal complex religious constructs—beliefs, practices and lived experiences—that often become disconnected from institutionalised religious structures in displacement. As a result, women increasingly relied on personal and non-institutionalised religious resources and spiritual capital, much of which remains invisible to outsiders. Religious practice thus frequently served as a way for women to express agency, evolving into a more personal, spiritual and faith-centred sphere, challenging approaches that treat religion merely as culture (Geertz, 1973).

This chapter argues that despite the complex role of religion, as a source of both vulnerability and resilience, humanitarian service providers often secularise displaced women's experiences and overlook religious resources they value, due to the gaps between lived experience and policy and practice. This disconnect persists because religion continues to be treated as an individual characteristic, rather than a wider sociocultural and political force. But framing religion as solely a universal, static category and a private belief system underplays religion in the wider power dynamics (Asad, 1993). The chapter thus calls for recognising religion as integral to women's lived realities and for mobilising engagement with diverse religious actors to strengthen protection. It translates the integrated intersectional and socioecological framework into an applied innovation—an intersectional

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socioecology of protection—offering concepts and tools to address religious influences in violence against displaced women. In doing so, it aims to reflect those elements that already sustain survivors. Moving beyond functional secularism, building such a socioecology requires disrupting the disconnects between secular humanitarian, migration, asylum and religious systems in scholarship, policy and practice and aligning them with women's experiences. Consequently, this chapter advances a case for why religion should be integrated into VAW prevention and response.

Specifically, the chapter demonstrates the pragmatic value of the theoretical innovations advanced throughout the book: the spiral continuum of violence, religion as intersectional vulnerability and a socioecological resource, conservation of religious resources, adaptive religious coping and the spectrum of religious exclusion and inclusion. The chapter proceeds by outlining conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions, before offering forward-looking strategies and recommendations for humanitarian actors and policymakers. The following discussion is organised around the book's core analytic objectives religion as: 1) an intersectional vulnerability; 2) a resilience resource; and 3) an included or excluded factor in the humanitarian system. I begin by discussing the immediate insights from applying an integrated intersectional and socioecological framework, which invite rethinking of vulnerability and resilience across the humanitarian–migration–peace–development nexus.

When intersectionality and socioecology meet resilience

The meeting of intersectionality, socioecology and resilience gives rise to intersectional socioecology of protection which means seeing protection through the intersecting identities and resources that sustain women. It includes their faith and places and systems around them to reduce harms and strengthen what already helps them cope and heal. Attending to this intersection matters, especially when we understand protection as an outcome of the dynamic relationship between resilience and vulnerability, as reflected in many women's stories.

This book shows the risk and protective sides of religion, both operating 'outside-in' and 'inside-out'—as an external identity and an internal belief and practice, intersecting with gender, race, marital status, age and legal status in the spiral continuum of violence. The applied theories of intersectionality and socioecology reveal a dynamic interaction between religion, resilience and vulnerability across all levels of the ecosystem and within women's lived experiences of VAW, suggesting not only who is most exposed but also who can mobilise which strengths from their identity. First, I discuss an intersectional approach to

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resilience through a socioecological lens and, second, a socioecological approach to resilience through an intersectional perspective. Together, these approaches surface the multidimensional functions of religion in VAW, as both source of victimisation and of fortitude.

On the one hand, bringing resilience into intersectional approaches helps build understanding of survivors' resistance strategies. These survivors were not mere 'subjects' passively exposed to intersecting inequalities but individuals who actively responded, resisted and negotiated their subordination by deploying coping strategies which were available within their intersecting identity. In other words, intersectional vulnerabilities as inputs can activate resilience capacities, which in turn operate as outputs in countering survivors' victimisation. But, as reflected in women's relationships with the divine, these capacities extend into the transcendent realm, beyond the material and temporal dimensions of this world. Additional research into intersecting identities and corroboration from other demographic groups may further uncover such phenomena.

On the other hand, bringing intersectionality into considerations of resilience contributes to understanding causes of violence and the socioecological conditions affecting expressions of resilience. In particular, this can contribute to a better understanding of the environmental factors in psychological conditions associated with intersecting identity-based advantage and disadvantage (Rosenthal, 2016). It enables the conditions and incidents to which survivors developed their resilience, responding to a question, 'what the survivors were resilient to'. Considering the detrimental effects of identity-based discrimination on mental health (e.g. Noh et al., 1999; Sorsoli, 2007), racialised migrant discrimination experienced by women in Tunisia and Türkiye impacted their mental health, alongside the compounding impacts of accumulative violence.[1]

Moreover, adopting intersectional perspectives in resilience research helps to deconstruct survivors' temporospatial positionality across diverse stages of migration and the socioecological factors shaping their experiences, including religion, culture and the structural conditions influencing coping capacities. Intersectional and ecological considerations of the social environment help conceptualise resilience expressions. Everyday harms, such as racism, anti-immigrant sentiments and hostile environments, deplete resilience capacities, imposing further violence. Thus, intersectionality enriches resilience research by situating coping within social and structural contexts, addressing critiques of resilience being too actor-centred and often neglecting the structural context depleting one's capacities to bounce back (Hart et al., 2016; Olsson et al., 2015). I therefore discuss next

[1] Racialised migrant discrimination, in particular, undermined forced migrant survivors' self-esteem, and contributed to fragmenting their identities and compounding trauma.

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the visible patterns of harms and the conditions under which women mobilised strengths from their identities.

Religion as intersectional vulnerability

The stories of diverse groups of displaced women (married, divorced, widowed and single) engaged in my research, connect through their experiences of the gaps in protection policy driving violence against them beyond the temporospatial boundaries. For many women, religion was central and operated as both an external (identity-based) and an internal (belief-based) factor which intersected with other axes of vulnerability in the violence continuum. However, for many women on the move, religious identity manifests and shapes their experiences very differently. This is because religious influences operate simultaneously at micro/domestic (beliefs/practices), meso/community (families) and macro/structural (politics, sectarian dynamics) levels, shaping stigma and control in some contexts and solidarity and survival in others.

Women's experiences also indicate the central place of migration-related vulnerabilities, such as socio-economic inequities arising from institutionalised discriminations that enabled and intensified other acts of violence. Most respondents were subject to 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2003), whereby wider social structures determine how they should live and how they should die. For instance, the lack of work permits and lack of access to public funds increased women's vulnerability to abuse. In some contexts, such as Libya, women were 'migrantised'—their racial and migrant identities homogenised—and subjected to exploitation. Those with precarious legal status (e.g., asylum seekers and irregular migrants) were entrenched in 'slow violence' (Mayblin et al., 2019)—inflicted by hunger, lack of clothing and hygiene items, social isolation and lack of support from the state. Some who did not meet the criteria for official refugee aid were left without any public support. Migration-related factors also subjected many women to 'violence of uncertainty' (Grace et al., 2018) and the 'violence of abandonment' (Davies et al., 2017). Uncertain settlement and deportation policies made them fear that their residence permits would be revoked. They also felt threatened by the possibility of sudden deportation or criminalisation of their stay. Those without any support in deplorable housing conditions and shelters felt forgotten and abandoned by mainstream migration organisations and authorities.

Structural forms of violence reinforced one another, normalising violence against displaced women and enabling interpersonal, family and spiritual violence, often perceived as culturally sanctioned. While the intersections of domestic violence and culture (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005; James, 2010) are often excessively problematised in ethnic minorities rather than in masculinities (Dustin, 2016), this study challenges the perception that minoritised women are victims

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of their own culture (Menjívar and Salcido, 2002). It is important to shift focus to the intersections of gender–culture–religion in shaping experiences of domestic abuse over time and place. For example, some Levantine respondents believed that their husbands, who justified abuse by recalling religious arguments, were contravening religious teachings, a pattern also observed in refugee women in Australia (Ghafournia, 2017). These findings also suggest that older women tended to internalise some religious beliefs (such as in destiny), which had hindered them from seeking support when they were younger. These and other incidents of intersecting domestic abuse and spiritual violence extend the understanding of the spiral continuum of violence to include harm inflicted on the soul without bodily marks (Galtung, 1969). Violence against women also move beyond static categories such as camp and non-camp settings, drawing attention to the deplorable refugee journey itself as a form of violence. Accordingly, integrating a spiral logic of violence into interventions, including risk assessment, funding cycles and monitoring, is crucial to address temporal myopia and align interventions with the lived pace of harm and healing.

While the gender–culture–religion nexus shaped different experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) and family violence, women sharing the same cultural background held different religious views on the role of religion in VAW. Interestingly, some Levantine women who self-reported higher levels of faith literacy deployed a faith-based defence mechanism against spiritual violence.[2] Similarly, individuals within the same religious groups held different cultural views on VAW, for example in regard to honour concerns, stigma and shame. Most Levantine women experienced complex family violence before and during displacement and in refuge. For instance, the obligation of women's obedience to spouses and mothers-in-law was a cultural norm, that often intersected with religion in exacerbating women's vulnerability. However, findings suggest that women did not associate religion with their suffering. To avoid epistemic violence, I argue for grounding Levantine women's perspectives on spousal violence in their worldview, in which they viewed violence through their religious (Qur'anic) knowledge on protection. Without insider knowledge, some of these women's views about spousal violence, such as their intolerance of a husband's violence but acceptance of disciplining women perceived to have acted lewdly, may appear paradoxical for outsiders. Viewing these perspectives through a decolonial and Islamic feminist lens offers a more grounded interpretation.

Finally, religious identity evolved across different times and places in intersection with gender and race. At times, it manifested as a driving, contributing and passive force in shaping survivors' vulnerability and resilience. For example, the

[2] Women with lower general and faith literacy appeared more likely to submit to patriarchal interpretations. Conversely, women with higher faith literacy seemed to strategically deploy religion to counter misconceptions.

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same religious identity could expose a woman to sectarian persecution in one context yet become a source of solidarity in another. External factors—such as perceived religious identity—interacted with geopolitical power structures, while internal beliefs shaped coping and resilience. For example, Levantine women with Sunni Muslim identities faced inter-sectarian discrimination within complex geopolitical conflicts in Syria and Iraq, heightening their exposure to violence and multiple traumatic events. 'Embodying the enemy' and being targeted by different militia factions for their perceived religious identity and external appearance as supposed Sunni or Daesh-affiliated subjects, they adapted their religious attire in different locations. Even after fleeing to Türkiye and finding religious tolerance, they encountered discrimination and abuse due to legal refugee status, ethnicity and nationality (Almasri, 2023).

In Southern Tunisia, Sub-Saharan respondents encountered compounded discrimination—racial and religious—during transit and temporary refuge, which aggravated the structural violence against them. Many experienced mistreatments based on appearance and perceived religious association. While religious conflict and persecution on religious grounds prompted some Sub-Saharan women to flee their countries, in Tunisia many of them equated racial prejudice with religious bias, as some perceived their race as synonymous with their Christian faith. These dynamics illustrate what I call religious racialised vulnerability, a concept which contributes to the broader scholarship on the racialisation of religion. Also, Mirza's (2013) concept of 'embodied intersectionality' proves useful in describing the conditions of displaced women who embodied religiously racialised and gendered identities that intensify their exposure to violence.

Religion as socioecological resource

Behind every story of displacement and the silence of suffering is faith and resilience speaking louder than despair. For many displaced women, religion was part of their lives and identities, extending their agential coping capacities. Many described it as their only solution for the psychological stressors and exploitation they face in their perilous journeys, as well as a 'weapon' against their perpetrators. In extending their self-reliance, women turned to transcendent and personal religious resources to address ruptures in their social relations during displacement, such as family separation, stigma and isolation.

Building on these insights, the empirical findings first expand the ecological model to include survivors' relationships with the divine, extending it into the transcendent realm. Second, they deepen the understanding of the 'ecological fit' (Harvey, 1996) by applying it to divine relationships, thereby contributing to an intersectional socioecology of protection that centres religious influences. The extension to the supernatural realm suggests that where access to support

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is unavailable, religious coping remains an accessible solution among displaced women who have faith. In addition, these findings enrich existing literature on religion, mental health and displacement, specifically contributing to resilience and coping theory by offering deeper insights into religious coping strategies against VAW in forced migration. This analysis challenges assumptions about resilience expressions in non-Western contexts, suggesting that these lived realities cannot be ignored if they are to leverage existing resources to address VAW and displacement effectively. This study's findings resonate with wider literature on resilience and the central role of religion among displaced women from Africa (e.g. Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2016; Abraham et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2005) and from the Middle East (e.g. Darychuk and Jackson, 2015; Veronese et al., 2019). Inversely, wider literature extends the understanding of religious beliefs contributing to a heightened distress. For example, Rutledge (2025) shows that among Iraqi IDP women whose feelings of having been oppressed for not being religious enough during the occupation gave rise to higher levels of psychological distress (two years after the occupation).

Conserving religious resources

Rethinking humanitarianism and protection requires reconstructing what constitutes a 'resource' and a protective factor in complex displacement situations. Women's narratives and humanitarian practices reveal that religious resources extend beyond the spiritual, moral, ethical, social and material dimensions. Survivors, many of whom experience spiritual suffering, rely on their inherent resources where formal systems thin out, yet the humanitarian infrastructure often lacks the language, tools and incentives to recognise and work with those resources.

The Conservation of Religious Resources (CORR), introduced in Chapter 5, demonstrates that spiritual capital serves as a critical buffer against stress and resource loss in displacement. Inspired by Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, CORR emphasises the role of diverse resource systems in trauma recovery and adaptive capacity. According to COR theory, individuals prioritise resources based on their socialisation and cultural context—within which religion often intertwines. Indeed, amid widespread losses of social and material assets, displaced women actively conserved the religious resources that remained accessible to them. Thus, the humanitarian system—amid fiscal constraints—can no longer afford to overlook the role of religion in displaced women's lives, as spiritual resources often sustain coping where formal support is absent. The separate existence of humanitarian and religious systems demands stronger mutual engagement with religious resources for building resilience in women's lives.

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The empirical evidence shows that displaced survivors used and adapted a range of religious resources, inviting an expansion of the original single reference to religion in COR inventory (i.e. 'visiting places of worship', Hobfoll, 2001:342) to a broader range of resources deployed by women, such as emotional, spiritual and intellectual. Despite a noticeable reduction in available resources during precarious displacement, the impact of what women conserved from their own spiritual capital—'*resources believed to reside in an invisible world*' (ter Haar, 2011:20)—was powerful. Personal prayers, devotions, reading scripture and fasting were often the only available resources to them. As in COR theory (explained in Chapter 2), women, to deal with stress, replaced unavailable communal religious resources with individual resources that were available. Individual resources were central to their coping and often intensified in refuge and transit, reflecting hope and resilience. Prayer assumed new forms—pleading, seeking refuge, confessing and giving thanks.

Women sought to preserve their religious identity and personal religious resources, deploying them daily to adapt to new circumstances and ruptures in their social networks. This process aligns with COR theory, which posits that 'individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value' (Hobfoll, 2001:341). But resource conservation among displaced women, whom I met, often reflected the harsh conditions and circumstances of resource loss, including displacement and erosion of social and economic capital. They applied resource conservation strategies as a buffer against resource loss, but the limited ability to adapt incurred losses and negative emotional outcomes, as stress occurred due to resource loss. For instance, Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia dominantly reported resource loss and scored higher in psychological distress than Levantine women in Türkiye who did not report significant religious resource loss. Thus, for some women among religious minorities, CORR operates as a possible strategy to remedy the devalued sense of religious identity but is shaped by spatial features of settlement, such as access to places of worship and religious demographics of host populations. Levantine women relied on individual worship by custom (and were part of the religious majority) but reported threat of loss and actual loss during religious persecution in Syria, where their beliefs and practices were challenged by combatants through de-socialisation (Galtung, 1990).

In addition, women with fewer resources were more likely to experience greater losses, confirming COR theory again: that loss leads to more loss. Sub-Saharan migrants, who possessed relatively fewer resources than Levantine migrants, faced more extensive religious resource depletion. Conversely, Levantine women were more likely to gain religious resources, drawing upon existing assets in host countries in which they shared religious affiliation. Sub-Saharan women, most of whom were attached to churches pre-migration, were minorities in terms of religion and expressed a strong need to attend places of worship to resolve their spiritual struggles.

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CORR, coined in this book, invites further research to advance theory and application of religious resources in humanitarian contexts at individual, community and societal levels. The findings highlight that resource loss is not only material: spiritual depletion compounds vulnerability and undermines coping capacities. Thus, integrating faith-sensitive approaches into humanitarian programming matters, to improve engagement with religious resources and reduce negative coping and spiritual suffering. These approaches become even more critical to support forced migrants' psychosocial well-being in contexts where resources are scarce and institutional support is inaccessible. In such contexts, working with local religious actors offers opportunities to restore or substitute lost spiritual resources—such as community prayer groups or pastoral counselling—but it requires upholding survivor-centred safeguards.

Adapting religious coping

Engaging with religion in strengthening protection from VAW matters for supporting existing coping mechanisms, resilience expressions and healing of women at risk and survivors. This study shows that women deployed their known and available ways of coping, turning to religious coping as a comfortable, well-known strategy (Carver et al., 1989), arguably because there was no other available solution. It specifically expands evidence on gendered coping patterns and how displaced survivors draw meaning and healing from their religion, but also sometimes experience unresolved spiritual struggles which might undermine their wellbeing. Surviving life-threatening situations in forced migration on the whole strengthened their faith. Most women drew upon their conserved religious resources to generate corresponding coping strategies of survival: religious beliefs in cognitive strategies, religious practices in behavioural strategies and religious experiences in emotional/spiritual strategies.

Despite coping theory commonly classifying religion as emotion-focused and passive (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the coping styles of respondents appeared blurred as they combined emotion-focused coping, in situations where they had little control (Carver et al., 1989), with problem-focused coping (e.g. seeking work and language classes). Women continued to sustain a relationship with God and combined their self-reliance with God-reliance, integrating emotion-focused and action-focused religious activities. Through cognitive, emotional and behavioural adaptive religious coping strategies, they expressed an active coping agency. While these strategies enabled many diverse groups of women to express agency, their religious adherence is often insufficiently understood by secular and Western-centric feminist discourses, which tend to consider them 'devoid of agency' (Bilge, 2010). Yet, women confronted their problems head-on by conversing with and co-opting God—the only higher power they believed able to remove their stressors.

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By resorting to the divine, they sought to change their situations in alignment with their worldview, challenging the perception that religious coping was a passive strategy (Finn, 1985). Conversely, a religious orientation of women's coping formed an agential process of gaining control. With limited institutional and social support, most women I met relied on 'non-institutional' religion and personal faith as identified in some other studies (Sossou et al., 2008; Parsitau, 2011).

Similarly to coping theory suggesting that people tend to utilise religious coping in situations where they have no control (Pargament et al., 2000; Harrison et al., 2001), women in protracted displacement often lacked control over distal and proximal stressors (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010). Their religious coping strategies constituted mainly positive coping methods with some strands of negative coping. For instance, drawing meaning from their religion was congruent with benevolent religious reappraisal (Pargament et al., 2000). Seeking closeness with God was akin to adopting an active collaborative approach to problem-solving by seeking God's love, support and partnership (Harrison et al., 2001). Some focussed on religion to perhaps distract themselves from daily stressors as a lifeline, similarly as IPV survivors in other locations (Ahrens et al., 2010).

Besides positive impacts, wider research also demonstrates the negative impacts of religious coping among survivors, which this study did not explore in-depth. For example, increased use of religious coping was linked with increased depression and PTSD symptoms among African American VAW survivors (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011). In this study, some Sub-Saharan migrants, as religious minorities, voiced feeling abandoned by God and religious congregations. Unable to resolve their spiritual struggles without external support, they turned to negative religious coping, for instance, feeling punished by God and questioning God's power. The combined loss of religious resources and partially negative religious coping outcomes, alongside seemingly higher psychological distress, suggest the spiritual needs of Sub-Saharan migrants (of both religions) were less fulfilled. Indeed, unresolved spiritual struggles can be related to PTSD symptoms (Brende cited in Goździak, 2002). These findings emphasise the importance of capacity building of humanitarian practitioners to recognise both positive and negative religious coping and factors exacerbating spiritual struggles. This involves accounting for spiritual distress as a legitimate protection and wellbeing concern and integrating these into case management and psychosocial assessments, while providing culturally and spiritually appropriate referrals or counselling to reinforce women's existing positive strategies.

Religious coping and mental health

Most women involved in my research exhibited both high religious coping and high psychological distress but their narratives consistently emphasised the

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emotional, spiritual, physical and mental effects of religion on wellbeing. Such findings align with the theory that coping does not necessarily entail better wellbeing but forms part of an adaptation strategy (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Religion may have buffered more severe mental health conditions. Although high religious coping and high psychological distress often coincides (Mahoney et al., 2015), it is important to note that greater suffering can prompt greater reliance on spiritual coping. This is because impairment and resilience are not opposing aspects of survivors' coping (Anderson et al., 2012), individuals can simultaneously exhibit strong faith resilience (Ögtem-Young, 2018) and psychological distress, as severe stressors often trigger resilience. While making causal inferences remains beyond the research scope, it is important to note that women with high religious coping reported slightly lower psychological distress in contexts where their religious identities aligned with the local majority. This outcome suggests that religious coping and psychological distress are shaped by macro socioecological factors evolving in precarious migration, such as conformity to a religious majority and longer settlement periods, which appear to strengthen coping capacities and mediate distress.

These findings somehow diverge from studies of non-migrant populations, which typically associate positive religious coping with better mental health and adjustment (Pargament et al., 1990; Adam and Ward, 2016; Frazier et al., 2004; Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005). In displacement, this relationship is more complex, being mediated by severe daily stressors, socioecological ruptures and trauma exposure. Indeed, women, by connecting religious beliefs and practices to positive emotions, buffered against negative emotions, supporting personal growth, which echoes broader evidence of religion's buffering effects (Amjad and Bokharey, 2014). Reliance on religious resources sustained women psychologically, helped to stabilise emotions and relieve anxieties, offering some level of certainty amid uncertain circumstances of displacement. Parsitau (2011) observed similar patterns among Kikuyu IDPs in Kenya, noting that faith played a significant role in buffering their experiences of suffering. However, theorising the effects of religion on buffering distress is complicated, as studies signal longitudinal rather than immediate results (Park et al., 1990). Nonetheless, perceptions of divine control support positive reappraisal and can mitigate traumatic stress (DeAngelis and Ellison, 2017; Maton, 1989).

Conversely, negative religious coping might have influenced some levels of psychological distress among women facing proximal and distal daily stressors, both related and unrelated to VAW, alongside multiple traumas. Drawing on Miller and Rasmussen's observation that daily stressors erode coping resources, I argue that two types of stressors shape mental health: those directly related to VAW and displacement and those unrelated with these experiences. The 'related stressors' include war, violence, loss of family, loss of wealth and other shocks in their lives. The 'unrelated stressors' involve lack of access to services and welfare, racism,

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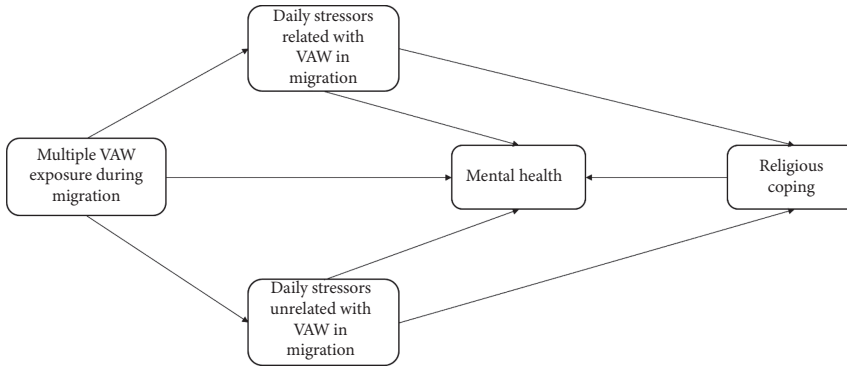


Figure 7.1 Relationships between VAW, religious coping and mental health (Author's own elaboration)

unsafe housing and other structural constraints which appear to mediate mental health and the influence of religious coping on mental health. Figure 7.1 illustrates these dynamics, showing how multiple VAW exposures and religious coping interact with mental health through daily stressors.

It is fair to conclude that religious coping was a vital resource for psychological survival of many displaced women, but the effects of such coping were shaped by intersectional vulnerabilities, socioecological ruptures and multiple stressors in displacement. Further longitudinal research is needed to clarify causal pathways and long-term impacts of religious coping strategies to inform mental health and psychosocial (MHPSS) interventions.

Shifting religious (dis)engagement

The pervasive scale of VAW remains on the one hand a serious humanitarian and security challenge, and a moral and religious crises on the other, demanding an integrated action from both humanitarian and religious actors. Ecological and social justice perspectives on resilience call for a joint responsibility to strengthen the systemic solutions to protection, beyond responsibilitising women for their own coping. Therefore, connecting mainstream, secular and religious humanitarian actors is critical for building trust and engaging with ethical, financial, material, moral and spiritual resources of diverse humanitarian actors and systems. These resources hold potential to improve the prevention of, and response to, VAW by supporting survivors, especially in fragile and under-resourced settings (le Roux and Pertek, 2022).

Strategic religious engagement becomes increasingly critical amid geopolitical realignments that risk intensifying religious exclusion and instrumentalising

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religion to legitimise discrimination and oppression, particularly against minoritised displaced women. Escalating hostility in immigration policies, advances in armed conflicts, reductions in foreign aid and the rollback of women's rights—coupled with anti-gender equality rhetoric—further constrain access to protection and assistance for women. These effects are particularly exacerbated for displaced women, whose intersecting vulnerabilities, including those related to religion, compound their exposure to abuse. However, in my research, practitioners engaged with religion selectively across a religious in(ex)clusion spectrum (see Chapter 6 in this volume), from an exclusive approach to inclusive and mixed approaches, as outlined in Table 7.1.

At the exclusive end, often as a precaution and by interpreting neutrality as faith avoidance, practitioners avoided discussing religious beliefs with survivors and privatised their spiritual needs, overlooking religious coping and healing resources. Instead, they often portrayed religion primarily as a source of oppression, risk or backward (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). At the inclusive end, practitioners tended to demonstrate relative religious awareness and engaged with religion to a certain extent only when survivors raised such a need, showing a degree of faith-sensitivity. But these approaches remain inconsistent, selective and often hindered by personal attitudes and organisational constraints.

Those with instrumentalist motivation engaged with religious actors to meet humanitarian aims, while those with pragmatic inclination worked with religion for operational relevance to address VAW. In a further step, some practitioners engaged with religion and deployed faith sensitivity in their protection work, indicating a transformational approach for religious engagement. Finally, some practitioners deployed a mixed approach, meeting both inclusive and exclusive ends, which meant they worked with religion while operating in organisations disengaged with religion. In summary, religious engagement in humanitarian action against VAW was unsystematic and often undeliverable due to personal attitudes to religion and limited organisational capacities, revealing the persistence of privatising religion. Humanitarian practitioners often favoured the term *faith*—seen as personal and non-institutional—over *religion*, which was perceived as more problematic (see also Wilkinson, 2018).

The religious in(ex)clusion spectrum identifies different levels of faith sensitivity with implications for VAW interventions. For instance, humanitarians using an inclusive approach recognised the nuanced role of religion in VAW and drew on underutilised resources, negotiating benefits and risks and adopting context-specific methodologies. Those using an exclusive approach missed important opportunities to enhance VAW interventions, for instance, overlooking survivor's perspectives and community-based religious resources. While the positions that practitioners held in the spectrum may change over time, it shows promise that religious engagement is already part of the humanitarian infrastructure, despite dominant secularity.

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Table 7.1 A typology of approaches to religion and VAW

Type of approach	Faith sensitivity	Views on religion	Implications for survivors and interventions
Exclusive: Avoiding religion	Faith insensitive	Limited awareness of the role of religion in the coping mechanisms of survivors. Religion seen as a source of oppression.	– Ignoring and avoiding survivors' religious beliefs concerning VAW. – Overlooking negative religious coping. – Failing to recognise survivors' religious needs, and not providing religious accessories to enable religious coping practices. – Adopting a blanket approach to religious groups to ensure inclusion.
Inclusive: Instrumentalist and pragmatic approach	Faith sensitive to an extent	Aware of the positives and negatives of religion in coping mechanisms. Religion seen as a multiple-edged sword, used to justify and counter VAW; religious ideas may deter survivors from seeking help.	– Working with faith leaders on local anti-VAW advocacy. – Pragmatic concerns about working with faith-based organisations. – Religion discussed in therapies when raised by survivors. – Providing facilities for meeting survivors' needs (Qur'an class, *iftars*). – Informing survivors about alternative and additional services provided by faith actors where relevant. – Conducting resource mapping and actors mapping, as well as stakeholder, cultural and demographic analysis.
Inclusive: Transformational	Faith sensitive	When appropriate included religion in MHPSS activities. Actively involved faith-based messages to prevent VAW.	– Including faith in PSS activities. – Using faith-sensitive methodologies in programming. – Working with faith leaders for local VAW sensitisation. – Involving religious perspectives in MHPSS interventions. – Training case workers on the religious needs of survivors. – Developing faith-inclusive curricula and manuals.
Mixed	Faith sensitive and insensitive	Personal inclusion and organisational exclusion of religion. Personal attitudes representative of inclusive views on religion but operating in organisations that are inactive in religious engagement.	– Practitioners voluntarily supported migrants with spiritual care. – Organisations not responding to migrant faith needs but the agentic action of individual staff instils some degree of religious engagement. – Faith-inclusion of organisations can be undermined by individual faith-insensitive staff.

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Nonetheless, the religious-secular disconnections at the macro level reflect structural biases embedded in the humanitarian system. Functional secularism and rigid interpretations of humanitarian principles may legitimise religious exclusion, despite growing evidence that faith and spirituality can support recovery (Ager and Ager, 2015) and that faith-sensitive strategies help mitigate VAW risks (le Roux and Palm, 2021; EC, 2021). Yet, the secular interpretations of humanitarian principles inadvertently impose narrow, neo-liberal interpretations: 'blindness to the ideological content of secularism risks the imposition of such values on communities affected by humanitarian crisis' (Ager, 2011: 462). In turn, a principled faith sensitivity neither romanticises religion nor suspends humanitarian principles (Salek, 2016); it operationalises impartiality by ensuring equal respect for different needs. However, secular interpretations of neutrality have led to the privatisation and marginalisation of religion in displaced people's lives, despite the fact that affected populations often place equal importance on their spiritual needs as on their physical survival (South et al., 2012). Responses to displaced populations often insufficiently recognise these religious needs and the self-protection priorities of displaced populations (Kidwai, 2017), which often leads to privatising their spiritual needs, while associating neutrality with religious disengagement. Similarly, efforts to ensure equal treatment of religious groups, often through a blanket approach, frequently result in the exclusion of some groups, requiring a tailored approach.

Despite religious roots in humanitarian action (Davey et al., 2013) and a renewed interest in religion (Schliesser, 2023) and some even claiming 'desecularisation' in some parts of the world (Berger, 1999), religious engagement often remains compartmentalised as a distinct workstream within humanitarian organisations. Binary interpretations of humanitarian standards often lead to perceiving religious engagement as a risk to neutrality and impartiality. The intricate intersection of VAW, religion and displacement necessitates conceptual, practical and policy shifts to strengthen the capacities of diverse actors—mainstream, international, local, faith-inspired and non-faith—to operationalise religion, as a complex factor, and to engage more intentionally with religious actors. However, as found in Chapter 6, power asymmetries between international agencies and local NGOs further constrain constructive engagement with religion. These dynamics are often driven by donor expectations and geopolitical sensitivities such as the 'War on Terror'. While international agencies typically have greater flexibility to interpret humanitarian principles and may adopt faith-sensitive approaches, smaller NGOs may avoid religion to appear impartial and secure funding from secular donors.

The status quo of functional secularism in the humanitarian system is increasingly being challenged by diverse partnerships and aid modalities. For example, some international agencies turn to Islamic philanthropy to bridge funding gaps and address dire needs, such as through UNHCR's Zakat Fund (Mohammed

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and Jureidini, 2022; Pericoli, 2025). Yet, increasing humanitarian funding from Muslim states sparks concerns within the international humanitarian community about how 'Muslim funding' might impact feminist achievements. Some claim programmes funded by Muslim donors perpetuate traditional gender roles (Erdilmen, 2024), while others, based on emerging evidence, argue for the transformative potential of Islamic philanthropy instruments (Fauzia, 2023; Pertek et al., 2025). Recent efforts to mobilise faith-inspired financial resources for refugee causes still require a gender lens if they are to improve outcomes for women.

Other challenges shaping the future of religious engagement include the geopolitical shifts. First, the rise of the far-right in Europe and in the US reinforces exclusion of religion from public discourse. It also fuels a rollback on women's rights, increasingly through 'femonationalism' (Farris, 2017). Far-right movements and politicians often invoke narratives of women's rights violations and anti-Islam rhetoric to foster anti-immigration sentiment and justify exclusionary policies. A disproportionate focus on Islam perpetuates the misguided belief that 'all immigrants are Muslims and all Muslims are immigrants' (Cesari, 2023: n.p.). Similarly, far-right movements may instrumentalise certain religions to promote nationalist agendas and restrict space for alternative religious expressions, or conversely, promote secularism as a means of exclusion.

Second, the rising threats of Russia and China also mean that European countries increasingly divert humanitarian funding to defence and security from geostrategic risks, which in turn heightens risks of violence and exploitation. Third, the US withdrawal from humanitarianism has devastating consequences on displaced women, undermining protection mechanisms and ceasing GBV services worldwide, including shelters, legal and psychosocial supports (Deitch, 2026). Resource gaps intensify gender and faith-related vulnerabilities but as far-right discourse restraining migration and secular-leaning humanitarian policy converge, religious identity can become a liability—sometimes (mis)read as a barrier to integration or as reinforcing patriarchal norms (Pertek et al., 2023).

On the whole, the religious in(ex)clusion spectrum proved to be useful as a heuristic tool for organising data and identifying the different ways of religious engagement in protection programmes, providing key themes for future research. In particular, understanding how religious actors engage with the humanitarian sector in regard to VAW is an important direction for further investigation to contribute to dialogue between diverse stakeholders. One emerging protection implication is to safeguard survivors' access to faith-aligned coping and support through a route-based and time sensitive protection, while investing in local women-led organisations and diversifying financing, so that humanitarian responses can uphold what already sustains survivors despite polarised politics.

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Balancing research strengths and limitations

This book brings together several strengths along several methodological, empirical and theoretical limitations. It contributes to gender, religion, forced migration, refugee and humanitarian studies, as well as practical discourse and international policy, by integrating different paradigms for ending VAW—namely, the international humanitarian and religious systems, with particular attention to personal faith. It highlights the extensive role of informal religion (personal faith and non-institutionalised practices) and the comparatively limited role of formal religion in displacement contexts, largely due to disruptions and shifting circumstances during migration.

A novel conceptual framework enabled the identification of both vulnerability sources and resilience resources—risk and protective factors—across different social identities and socioecological levels. While the framework shows promise, here it was applied by centring religion as an intersecting identity marker, leaving ample space for future research to explore vulnerability and resilience through the lens of other identity markers within and between diverse social groups.

In terms of limitations, first, the study's scope was inevitably narrow: it draws on thirty-eight displaced women's narratives from two distinct contexts out of over 123 million displaced people (UNHCR, 2025). These accounts represent only two religions—Christianity and Islam. Further research might examine how religion affects survivors affiliated with non-monotheistic religions, as well as examine the perspectives of male survivors and potential perpetrators to inform more inclusive interventions. Similarly, this study relied on a limited sample of thirty-six key informants, predominantly from the humanitarian sector; future research should actively engage diverse actors. However, key recurring themes in the study locations suggest some level of transferability to comparative contexts for forced migrants, even as they highlight contextually distinct patterns among Levantine and Sub-Saharan populations. These are offered as potential themes for future research rather than claims of broad generalisability.

Second, the study relied on eight interpreters and transcribers in documenting and validating the data. While I worked with skilled professionals, it cannot be guaranteed that produced interpretations did not alter respondents' meaning during word transition between different linguistic structures (as discussed in Chapter 1). As many respondents were people of faith, interpreters practising the same religion were recruited to ensure understanding of respondents' worldview. Nevertheless, limitations of language and the challenges of multiple epistemologies in interpretation cannot be eliminated.

Third, some interviews in Tunisia were limited in length due to efforts to safeguard respondents' wellbeing in extreme weather conditions. Considering the multiple traumas respondents had endured, I was mindful of how trauma affects memory. The accounts shared were not exhaustive but rather representative of

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narratives that respondents were able to recall and willing to share. Research shows that trauma rewires the brain, impeding memory retrieval or preoccupying the mind with intrusive memories (Van der Kolk, 2014). Some narratives were therefore fragmented—more vivid for recent transit experiences, less so for earlier abuses. This book thus cannot claim to capture the entirety of respondents' lived realities; it reflects what they were able and willing to share.

In interviews, many women spoke readily about the positive aspects of religion, perhaps to protect their identity from potential prejudice. Negative aspects were sometimes discussed only upon sensitive probing. Respondents may have suppressed doubtful thoughts to avoid appearing as contravening their beliefs. For example, Levantine respondents reported spiritual struggles in the survey but not in interviews, suggesting restraint in disclosing spiritual tensions, possibly due to personal convictions or the presence of the researcher and interpreters from similar social backgrounds. Future research might consider negative religious coping patterns in further depth.

Almost all participants practised their religion, although religiosity was not a recruitment criterion. Thus, this book offers no comparison with non-practising or non-religious women or men. In practice, establishing women's religiosity was challenging and probably affected study results.[3] Some respondents may have provided socially desirable responses, so bias cannot be eliminated.[4] Nevertheless, studies suggest that functional religious coping scales such as B-RCOPE (Pargament et al., 2011) are better predictors of religiosity and religion's functions than classic scales of religiousness (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). In data analysis, B-RCOPE scores were assumed to be indicative of women's religiosity alongside verbal religious references in interviews.

While CORR and adaptive religious coping offer valuable tools for understanding how survivors preserve and adjust their faith across displacement, both frameworks have limitations. They risk reducing sacred practices to functional 'resources', pay limited attention to gendered power and structural constraints, and may flatten cultural and theological diversity. Developed largely in Western psychological traditions, these theories do not fully capture collective or institutional dimensions of religious life, nor the political conditions shaping forced migration. For these reasons, I use them in dialogue with feminist, sociological and migration studies perspectives to avoid idealising or pathologising religion and to foreground survivors' agency and context.

[3] The basic tool used in this research aimed to collect information concerning migrant religious backgrounds to establish a general level of their religiosity, which was not necessarily representative of women's actual religiosity.

[4] As appearing religious in some cultures increases social status, some respondents might have projected their religiosity and avoided expressing ungratefulness (e.g. in Islam and Christianity, expressing ungratefulness to God is less acceptable).

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As a one-off rather than longitudinal study, I could not establish a baseline for religiosity, coping or psychological distress pre-displacement. It is therefore impossible to ascertain to what extent coping strategies evolved during displacement. Women's narratives and Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI, Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996) suggest that faith often deepened after adversity. While PTGI was applied in the survey drawing upon evidence that around half of refugees experience trauma (Chapter 2), it cannot, however, be guaranteed that all respondents experienced trauma personally or directly. Nor could the study account for personality traits influencing religiosity.[5]

In addition, although studies in other contexts show the diversity of traditional practices affecting healing among refugee populations,[6] this study barely observed traditional practices due to a lack of traditional or religious services in transit and refuge. Only three respondents reported resorting to traditional healing practices before and during migration in the survey. Given the diversity of traditional practices across Levantine and Sub-Saharan cultures, further research in this field would be valuable. Finally, differences in discrimination between respondents of different religious affiliations are not presented because respondents broadly identified as Christians and Sunni Muslims. While some Christians specified church affiliation, all faced racialised discrimination regardless of denomination. For this reason, the analysis focused on vulnerabilities linked to religion in general rather than intra-religious distinctions.

So what? Resourcing protection socioecology

This section translates the book's framework and analysis into concrete implications for developing an intersectional socioecology of protection in policy and practice, grounding it in intersecting identities and centring religion. Rethinking humanitarianism requires renewing diverse pathways for religious engagement and resourcing displaced women with resilience, while mitigating vulnerability. It should be a shared responsibility of humanitarian and religious actors to leverage diverse resources for the protection of displaced populations. A constructive engagement invites space to work with religious ideas, practices and experiences to strengthen the resilience of survivors and minimise risks, while advancing dialogue on how neutrality and impartiality can coexist with faith-sensitive practice (Salek, 2016). It is also a shared duty to develop capacities to jointly address VAW as an urgent humanitarian priority which requires religious literacy and cultural humility. Context-specific and localised approaches

[5] Previous research evidenced that certain personality types were inclined toward religious attachment (Schottenbauer et al., 2006). Future religious coping studies might benefit from accounting for respondents' personality types.

[6] For example, in Rohingya communities (Tay et al., 2018).

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are essential both to avoid homogenising displaced women and to address their complex and diverse realities.

This book spotlights the value of integrating faith-sensitive intersectional and socioecological analysis as a powerful lens for understanding displaced women's experiences, and for advancing both theory and practice. It identifies diverse resilience expressions, capacities, healing patterns and complex vulnerabilities across displacement. One important distinction is the different role that institutionalised and non-institutionalised religion play in displacement. While institutional religion may be perceived as politically sensitive or risky, non-institutionalised religion—that is, faith, spirituality (as lived religious experience, Schneiders, 1986) and various personalised expressions—often serve as a personal coping resource for women. Humanitarian actors need to navigate this distinction thoughtfully, ensuring that interventions neither impose secular norms nor romanticise nor institutionalise religion in VAW interventions. Moving towards systematic faith sensitivity involves rethinking structural secularism within policy frameworks and donor priorities, fostering conditions for more inclusive and less restrictive engagement with religious actors to reflect women's lived experiences in programme design.

With religion directly shaping the experiences of displaced women, governments, international organisations, humanitarian agencies and funding bodies might strategically consider how policies and programmes address the intersection of violence, protection and religion to ensure inclusive humanitarian outcomes for women in all their diversity. Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its commitment to 'leave no one behind' demands concerted efforts to strengthen humanitarian protection, prevent VAW and support displaced populations.

While I have discussed practitioner-oriented recommendations elsewhere (see Pertek, 2025; Pertek, 2024), across the spiral continuum of violence, protection efforts need to shift from incident-based responses to route-based practice—for example, providing mobile support through mobile health clinics, digital/remote work opportunities and portable safety and coping plans that accompany women across settings. It is also important that policy frameworks on working with religious actors include principled faith sensitivity to address VAW in conflict and displacement, while increasing flexible funding for women-led, local and faith-inclusive protection initiatives.

Supporting survivors: faith-sensitive intersectional and socioecological analysis

Displaced women's lived experiences of religion make it imperative for humanitarian and religious actors to engage with religion—rather than pushing it into

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the private sphere—so that the religious resources relied on by women can shape more responsive policies and programmes. Without such alignment, women are left to fight through faith alone, instead of being supported by systems designed to uphold their protection. The spiral continuum of VAW, as a protracted humanitarian crisis, calls for moving beyond materialist frameworks and critically reassessing the role of religion in response strategies.

In practical terms, it means integrating religious factors into intersectional and socioecological approaches for resilience building and risk reduction, including situational analysis, needs assessments and project and policy design, monitoring and evaluation. This aligns with Asad's (1993) call to treat religion as a form of life—historically embedded, shaped by power and open to internal critique. Incorporating these perspectives into intersectional analysis challenges secular biases and affirms the lived realities of women whose identities and resilience strategies cannot be reduced to binaries of oppression and liberation. To support the development of new tools to account for religious influences, Appendix 11 suggests an integrated intersectional and socioecological analysis to help identify the most vulnerable diverse groups of women and their available resilience resources. Excluding religion from analysis risks overlooking key drivers of resilience and oppression. Thus, it is important to adapt gender analysis by including religious, social and cultural influences that shift over time and place. An adapted Moser framework (Moser, 1993) offers a useful foundation for developing a faith-sensitive intersectional gender analysis tool (see Appendix 12). However, simply adding religion into frameworks (and 'stirring') without addressing deeper systemic and intersecting issues falls short of integrating faith-sensitive strategies into responses to displacement.

Among commonly recognised risk factors, such as gender and age, the inclusion of migration status and religious identity—often racialised—is key to better inform responses. Interventions designed with cultural and religious sensitivity are more likely to better overcome access barriers for survivors (Hough, 2013). Faith-informed programmatic methodologies can help mitigate the adverse effects of intersecting religious constructs and strengthen resilience, mobilising religious resources, while building upon the worldview of affected populations, for example, addressing domestic violence, early marriage and FGM/C (Pertek, 2020). The IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action (IASC, 2015), the primary reference for humanitarian practitioners, are yet to integrate faith sensitivity for violence prevention and survivor recovery, as proposed in Appendix 13.

Although extensive evidence shows religion plays a critical role in shaping resilience and coping strategies among forcibly displaced women, its inclusion in resilience frameworks remains marginal. Recognising the diversity of religious expressions and experiences among forced migrant communities—and their dual impact, as a resource and risk, on mental health and vulnerability—remains

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central to effective, ethical and inclusive humanitarian response. As the mental, spiritual and emotional dimensions of women's coping are deeply intertwined, so should the responses be multidimensional, addressing the multiple needs of forced migrants. Where needed, spiritually integrated therapies for VAW survivors (Murray-Swank and Pargament, 2005) may help survivors utilise spiritual resources and resolve spiritual struggles (Mahoney et al., 2015). Those undertaking strength-based approaches might consider the spiritual capital, religious coping capacities and personal strengths of survivors to support healing and rebuild fragmented identities. Also, peer support models grounded in faith values highlight the role of informal support systems (Qasim and Hynie, 2019).

A faith-sensitive, intersectional and ecological approach can enable MHPSS practitioners to identify and address the multiple, interrelated factors related to diverse social identities that shape wellbeing across individual, community and societal levels. Individual factors, which may shape resilience expressions or undermine healing, include the impact of trauma and daily stressors, for instance patriarchal religious constructs such as shame and self-blame and the impacts of structural violence such as racism. Further supports in host and transit countries for survivors' coping mechanisms are needed at different stages of migration, while recognising evolving situational and contextual risk factors. For example, facilitating access to faith networks and resources can support culturally familiar modes of adaptation and patterns of healing among displaced survivors.

In addition, central to an effective, ethical and inclusive humanitarian response is recognising the diversity of religious expressions, identities and experiences among forced migrant communities—and their impact on mental health and vulnerability. Equally important is appraising the impacts of religious influences, including intersecting forms of oppression, such as religious or inter-sectarian persecution and patriarchal interpretations, on survivors' distress levels to assess links between resilience and vulnerability (Rutledge, 2021). In cases of spiritual violence, referrals to trusted faith-sensitive service providers are essential, as are safe spaces for survivors to explore alternative religious interpretations to alleviate distress.

Women-led community-based protection

A vital approach for addressing VAW—aligned with the localisation agenda—is a community-based protection which draws on and supports displaced populations' inherent capacities and resilience to deal with their situations. A faith community-based VAW response leverages the displaced population's capacities instead of focusing only on risk, victimisation and trauma, especially in under-resourced and precarious displacement conditions. Migrant, refugee and host faith communities provide vital moral and material resources to support people on the move,

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regardless of their faith. However, while engaging displaced faith community members in protection programmes can enhance mental health and wellbeing, trauma and migration-related stressors may limit participation, necessitating trauma-sensitive approaches.

While ample evidence demonstrates the increasing role of religious leaders in humanitarian protection (Kraft, 2020, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2020; Carpi, 2023), it is important to recognise and engage with often less visible formal and informal women leaders to shift power and resources to actors closest to women at risk. As discussed elsewhere (Chapter 2 this volume) faith leaders—men and women—are influential figures in local faith communities, playing informal and formal roles in their communities. Having moral authority, they can encourage a change of behaviours and attitudes from individual and interpersonal to communal and societal levels. For many survivors, faith leaders—as trusted faith representatives—are their first 'go-to person' for support. Anecdotally, in displacement settings, faith leaders—who are often operating outside institutionalised religious structures (Carpi, 2023)—are less constrained by male-dominated social structures, and so may be better positioned to engage with VAW programming.

The shift towards feminist foreign policy in some governments (such as Sweden and Canada) places emphasis on supporting women-led organisations that are well versed in the challenges women face within their communities. Embedded within local networks and women's organisations or groups, they play a pivotal role in providing direct support to survivors of VAW. Their proximity to affected populations positions them as trusted intermediaries who can bridge gaps between humanitarian actors and local communities. However, levels of faith literacy among women leaders may vary, and cultural norms can influence their perspectives on VAW to differing degrees. Informal women leaders, in particular, can facilitate a nuanced exploration of religious beliefs and practices related to VAW and actively contribute to project cycles—from design to implementation and evaluation—ensuring that interventions are culturally and contextually grounded. Equitable partnerships that value their situated expertise, while upholding survivor centred safeguards, make localisation substantive rather than merely contractual.

Similarly, women's faith organisations and groups—whether from migrant, refugee or host communities—serve as vital sources of information, social exchange and belonging for displaced women, including those of faith and those without. Although displacement often disrupts these networks, VAW programming within faith communities can play a transformative role by helping women and adolescent girls, from both religious majority and minority groups, re-establish their preferred groups and activities. Such initiatives not only restore social support systems but also strengthen resilience and collective agency. Engaging women's groups also aligns with feminist humanitarian approaches that prioritise women-led solutions and amplify their voices in decision-making. I

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outline elsewhere (Pertek, 2024) potential steps for establishing collaboration with women's groups and informal and formal leaders in faith settings. In addition, as staff and volunteers in faith institutions are often the first responders assisting people along migration routes (for instance, providing food, safe spaces and shelters), they require training, knowledge and skills for their own safety and for the safeguarding of survivors.

Way forward and closing remarks

Rethinking humanitarianism does not invite exceptionalism; it is a call to good practice of protection done better—to be survivor centred, evidence based and context specific. For humanitarianism to keep its promise under conditions of scarcity, it demands space to be created for greater diversity in aid—in its ethics, methods and budgets—for the realities that affect survivors and their ability to access what sustains them. It entails renewing engagement between humanitarian and religious actors, and operationalising faith sensitivity into humanitarian frameworks, co-ordination systems and localisation strategies to work with religious resources to address VAW. Respecting diversity of religious expressions, building on local knowledge systems and building diverse partnerships between religious and secular actors to engage moral and financial resources to strengthen protection is central for humanitarian reform.

Revisiting Ayesha's story (Appendix 1) at the opening of this book prompts reflection on how improved faith sensitivity in the humanitarian sector might have transformed her journey—and the journeys of women like her. Such alignment could probably have shifted the burden of survival from an individual woman to systems designed to protect them. Therefore, humanitarian and religious systems need to align more closely with the diverse realities women inhabit, rather than expecting women to bridge the gaps alone. Ultimately, bridging humanitarian, religious and asylum and migration systems is key to creating more inclusive and responsive protection futures.

This book sought to provide a multidimensional and novel account of how religious understandings and expressions influence forced migrant women's experiences. By centring religion in survivors' narratives, it documents the dual role as an intersectional vulnerability and a socioecological resilience resource, providing new evidence to existing theories. As a mixed blessing, religion exacerbated women's vulnerability to violence at times but was also a significant resource enabling and enhancing resilience and coping. Religion, therefore, manifests in displaced women's lives as both a risk and a protective factor, demanding a bolder recognition of the importance of designing culturally appropriate interventions that reflect displaced women's realities. An intersectional socioecology of protection rooted in women's worldviews would

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mean they no longer struggle alone but survive within systems that uphold their humanity. Combining gender, refugee and forced migration and religious studies with intersectionality and resilience frameworks advances understanding of the complex intersections between VAW, religion and displacement. While not exhaustive, the findings identify significant themes and invite epistemic diversity which further interdisciplinary work might explore among diverse displaced populations, including men, amid rapidly shifting geopolitical circumstances and the rollback on gender equality.

This book has argued that rethinking humanitarianism goes beyond technical fixes—it demands a profound shift towards approaches that honour the lived experiences of displaced women. A wider debate is needed across humanitarian, migration, human rights and faith-based sectors on how agencies can adapt interventions to uphold the rights and needs of survivors, recognising intersecting religious influences on VAW experiences. For that, the 1949 Geneva Conventions' provisions on religious practice during armed conflict warrant re-examination to address protracted displacement realities. This matters because gender-sensitive access to religious resources for displaced women is needed beyond the conflict zone—in refugee camps, transit settings and asylum systems—to uphold their dignity. Faith sensitivity and engagement with religious resources are not optional add-ons; they are central to resilience and survival in contexts of violence and displacement.

Finally, beyond the material world, women's accounts uncover the metaphysical dimension: for many, displacement was not only a physical journey but also a spiritual one. They reveal how the transitional nature of religion in displacement extends beyond social constructivism, reflecting a hybrid understanding of religion that combines substantive and functional approaches. For many women, religion carried sacred value—a transcendent reality enabling survival, empowerment and everyday coping, beyond its cognitive and behavioural functions. Traditional communal roles of religion, often defined by theorists in non-crisis settings, evolved into deeply personal beliefs and practices that sustain people when social, economic and institutional systems fail. Across borders and through uncertainty, religion, faith and spirituality keep displaced women going—wherever they were, and wherever displacement took them.

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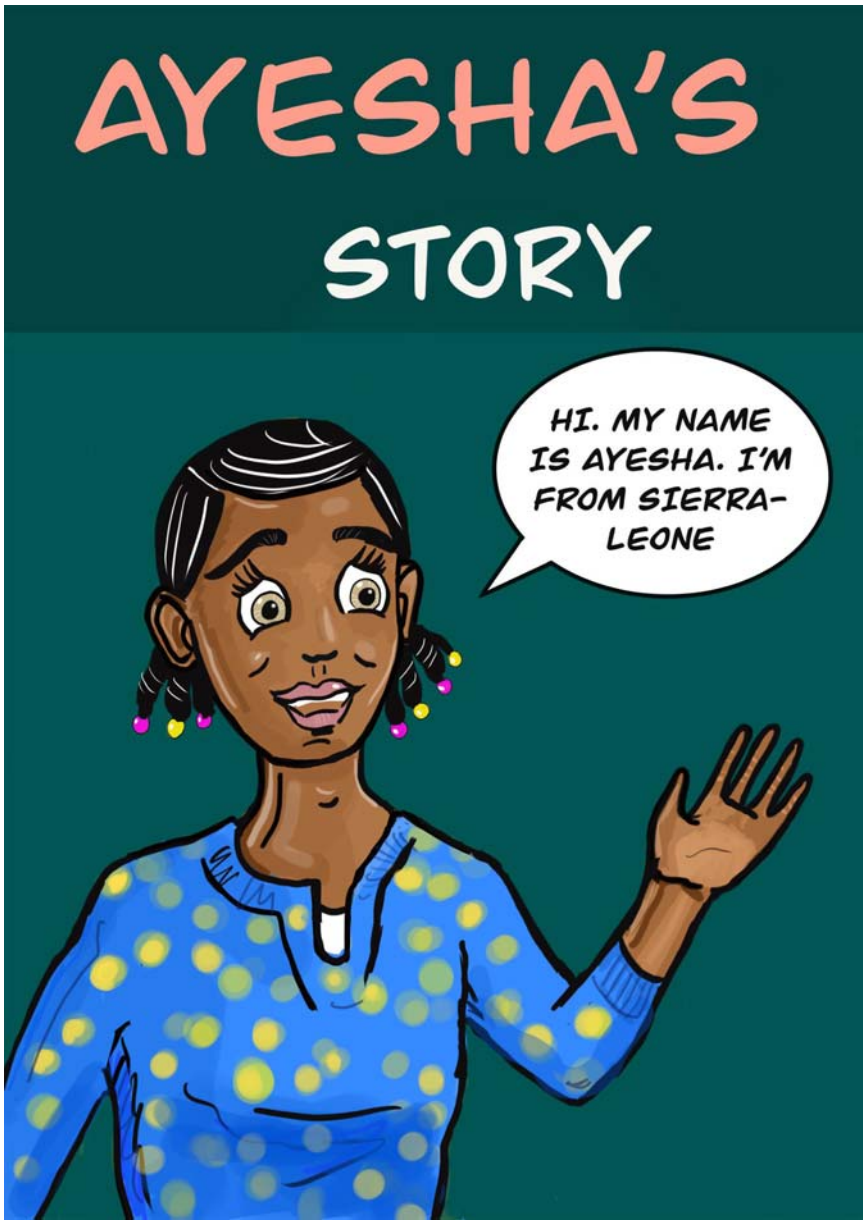
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APPENDIX 1

Ayesha's Story of Displacement

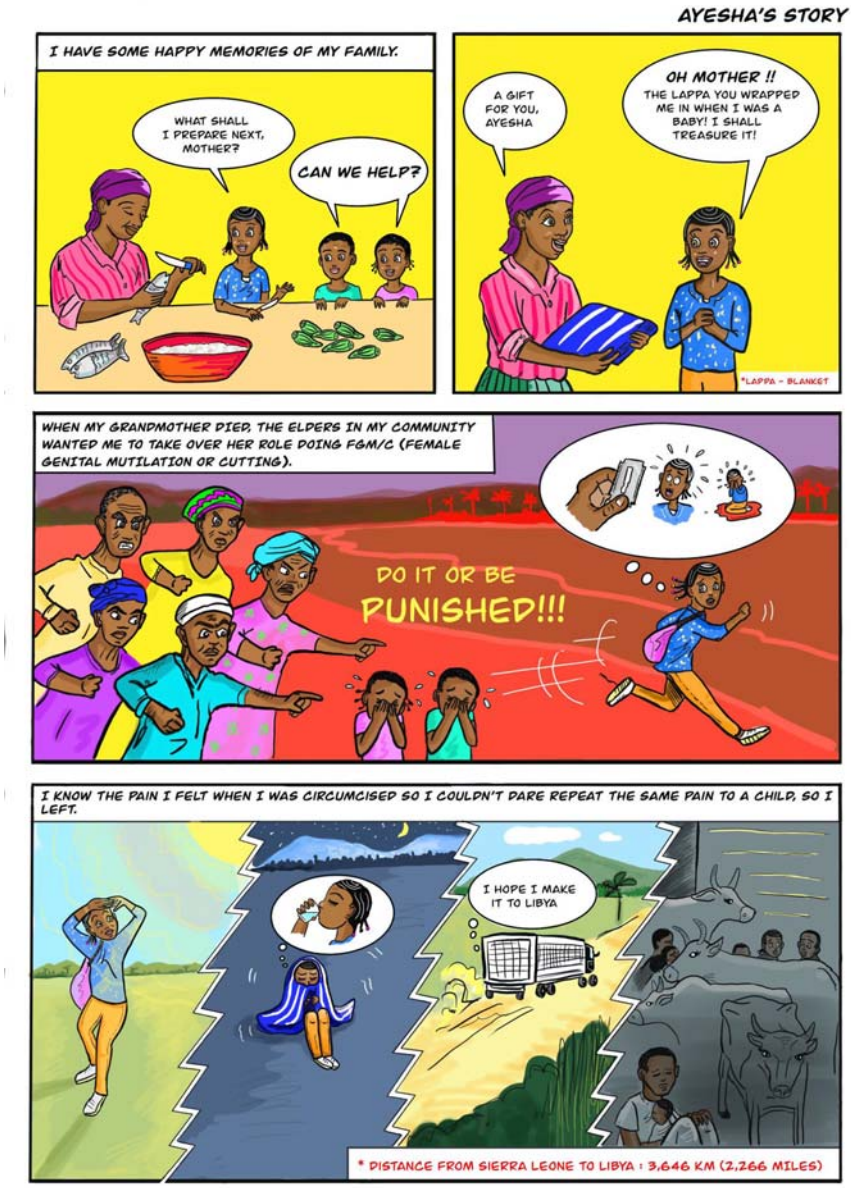


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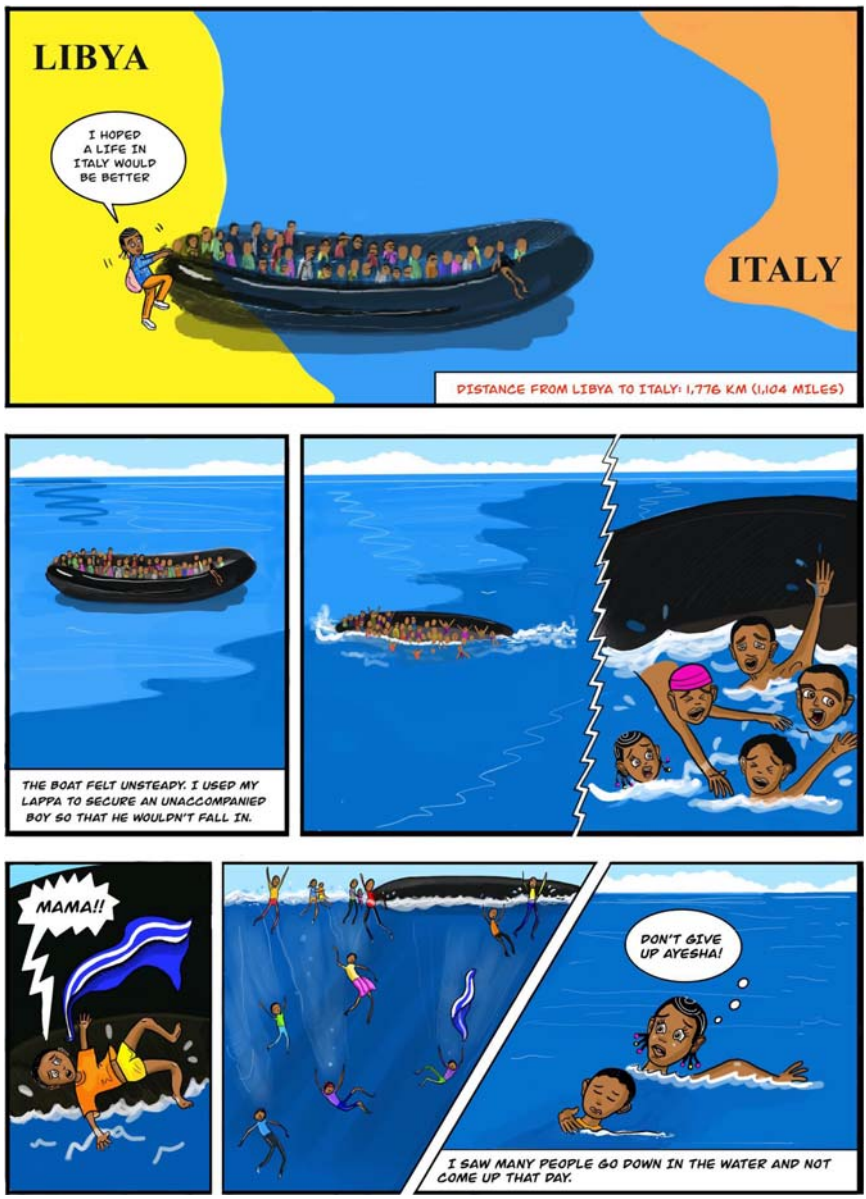
IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I HAVE BEEN HOME. NOW, I'M A REFUGEE IN TUNISIA. MANY BAD THINGS HAVE HAPPENED TO ME BUT I LIVE IN HOPE THAT THINGS WILL CHANGE.



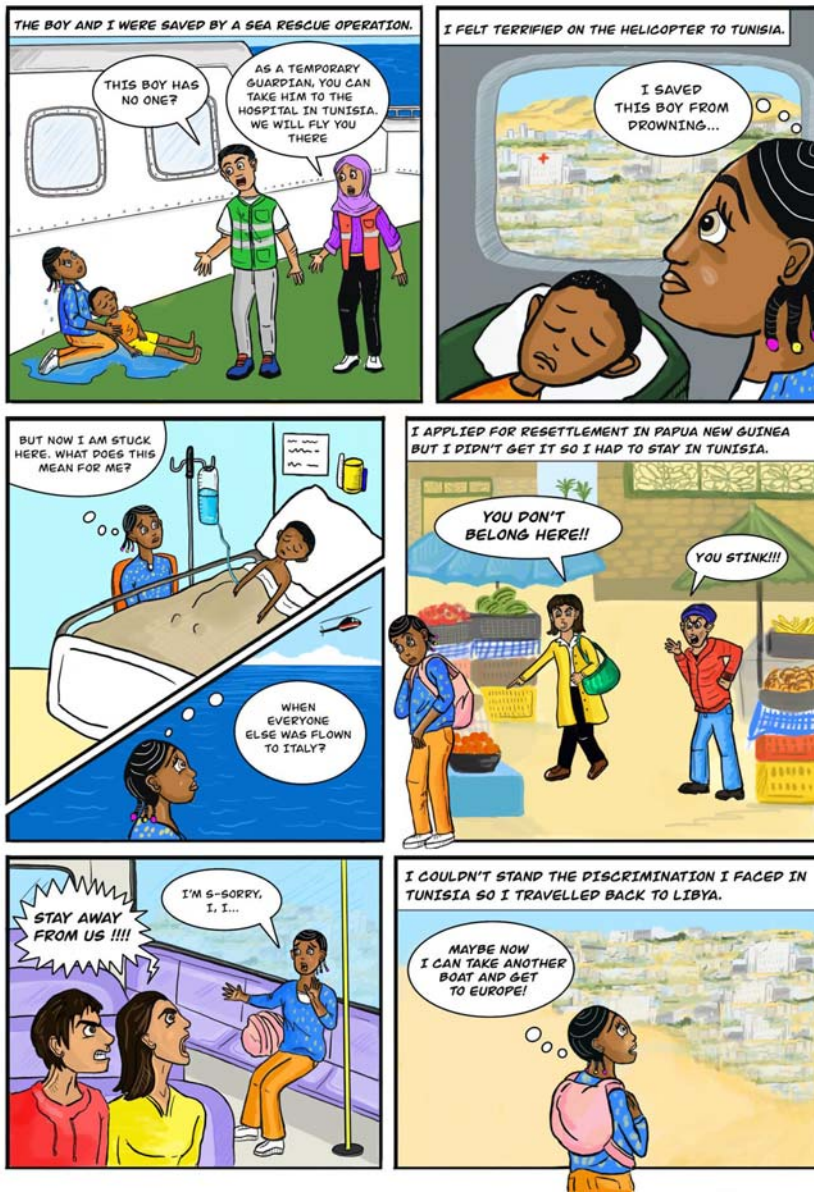
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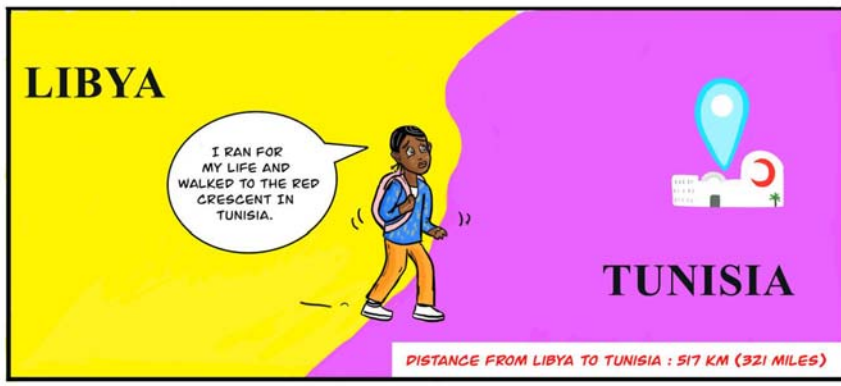
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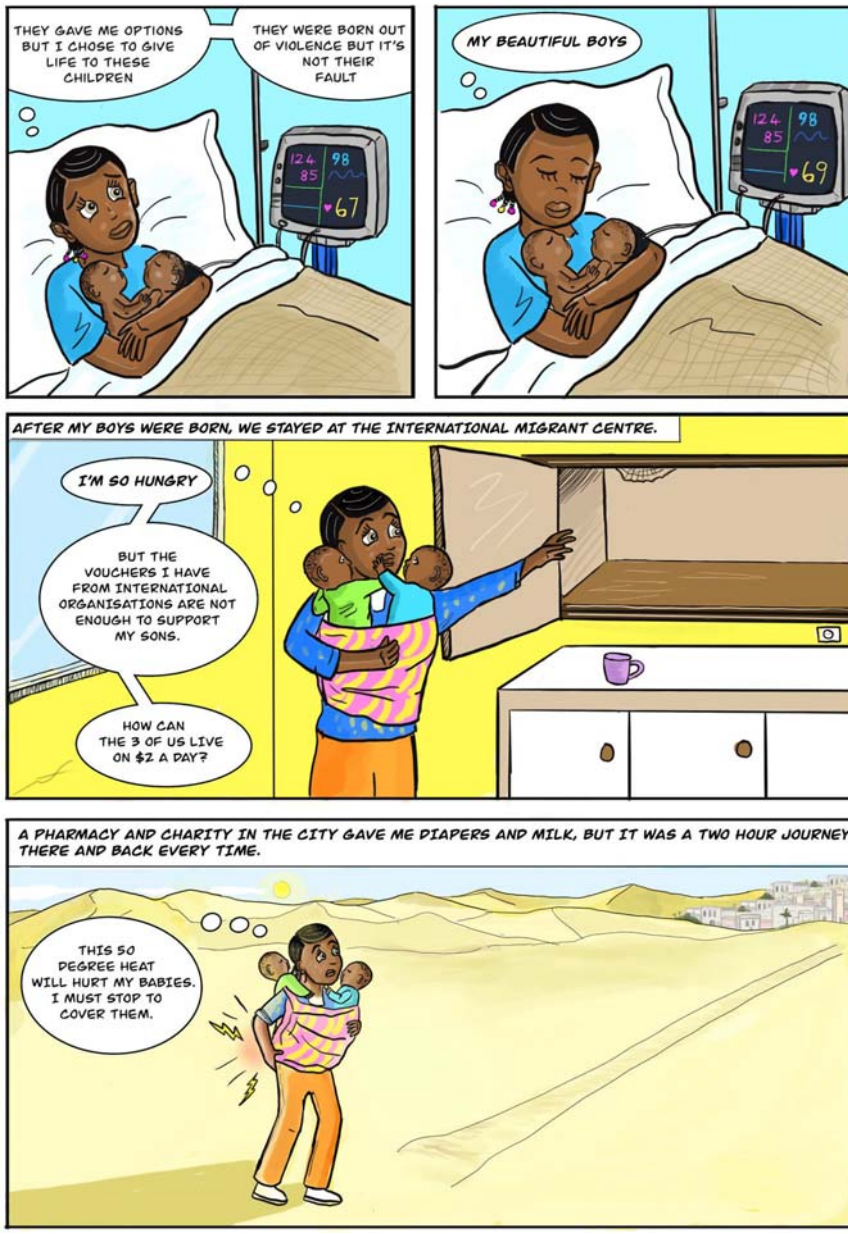




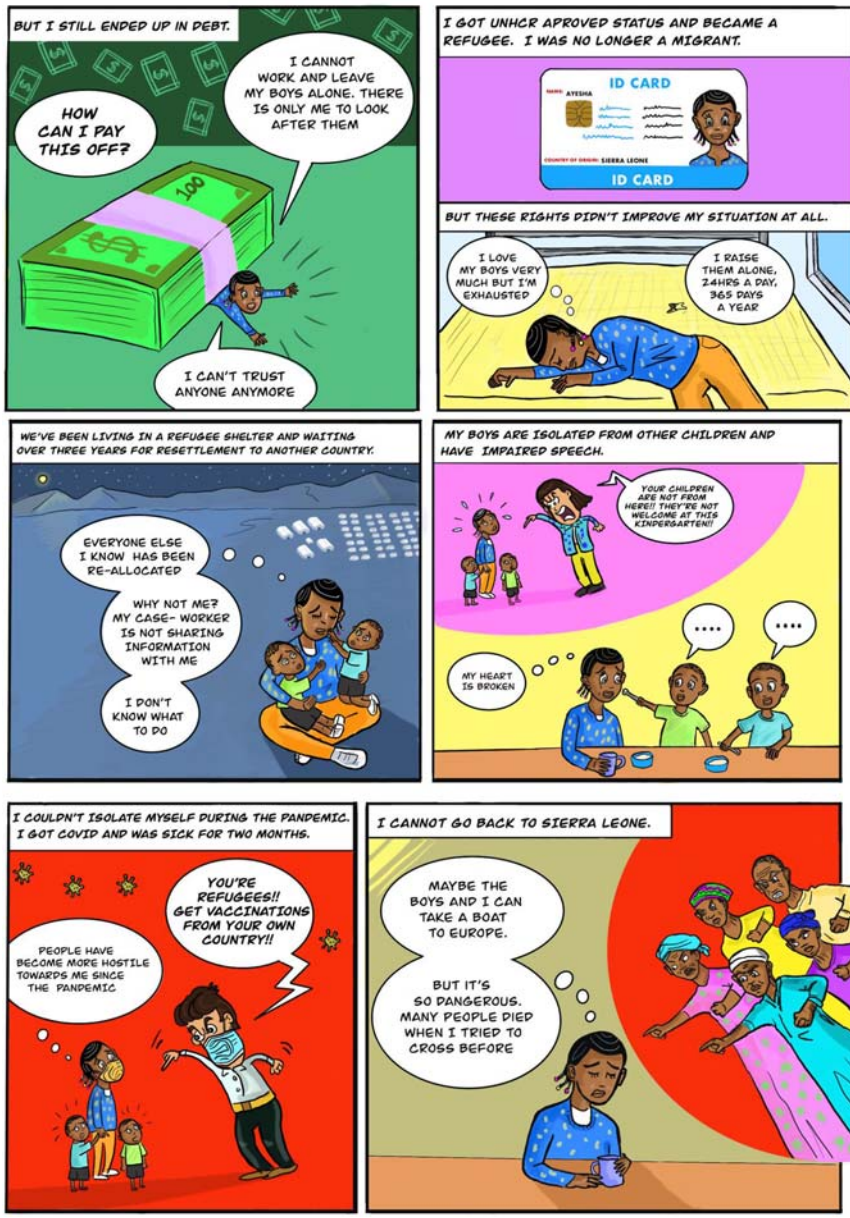




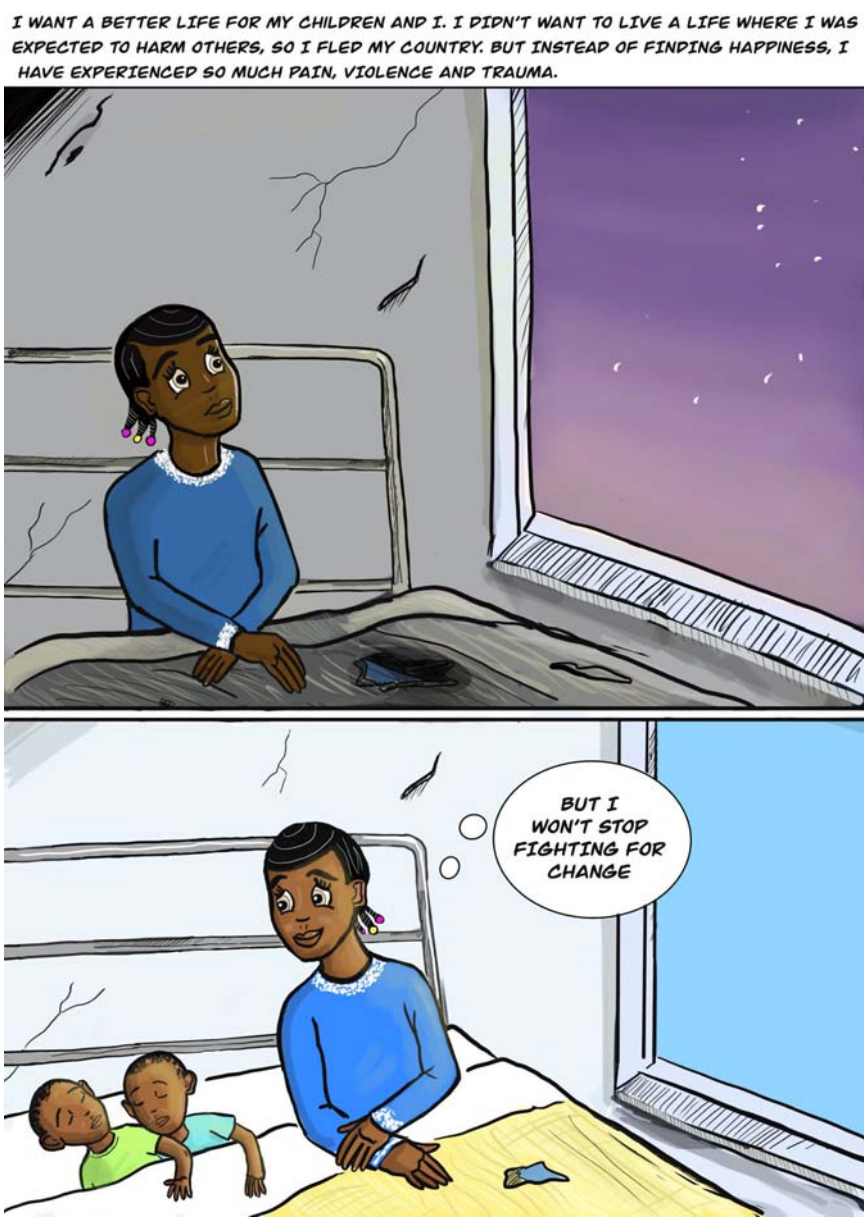
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APPENDIX 2

Demographic profile of respondents

A. Profile of participating women

Demographic profile	Description	Levantine (n = 23)	Sub-Saharan (n = 15)	Total
Religion	Christian	–	11	11
	Muslim	23	4	27
Age	18–24	3	4	7
	25–34	11	7	18
	35–44	7	4	11
	45–54	1	–	1
	55–64	1	–	1
Gender	Female	23	15	38
Legal status	Refugee	21	3	24
	Asylum-seeker	1	6	7
	Rejected asylum-seeker	–	1	1
	Irregular migrant	1	5	6
Partnership status	Single	9	8	17
	Monogamous relationship	11	6	17
	Polygamous relationship	2	–	2
	Prefer not to say	–	1	1
	In separation	1	–	1
Marital status	Single never married	1	5	6
	Civil marriage	11	1	11
	Traditional marriage	2	5	7
	Widowed	5	–	5
	Divorced	2	1	3
	Separated	–	2	2
	In the divorce process	2	–	2
	In partnership	–	1	1
Age of marrying	Before 15	6	–	6
	Before 18	7	4	11
	19–24	8	3	11
	24–34	–	3	3
	35–44	1	–	1

continued

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continued

Demographic profile	Description	Levantine (n = 23)	Sub-Saharan (n = 15)	Total
Having children	1–2	11	12	23
	3–4	4	2	6
	5–6	7	1	8
Setting of origin	Rural	7	9	16
	Urban	16	6	22
Education	No education	2	2	4
	Primary	7	2	9
	Before age 18	3	–	3
	Secondary	5	9	14
	University	6	2	8
Occupation	Student	2	1	3
	Salaried employed	–	2	2
	Self employed	3	3	6
	Unemployed	9	6	15
	Retired	–	1	1
	Others	1	–	1
	Prefer not to say	1	–	1
	Full time mother	5	2	7
	Student	2	–	2
Health problem reported	Difficulty seeing	–	4	4
	Difficulty walking and climbing stairs	6	1	7
	Difficulty remembering or concentrating	4	4	8

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B. Profile of participating key informants

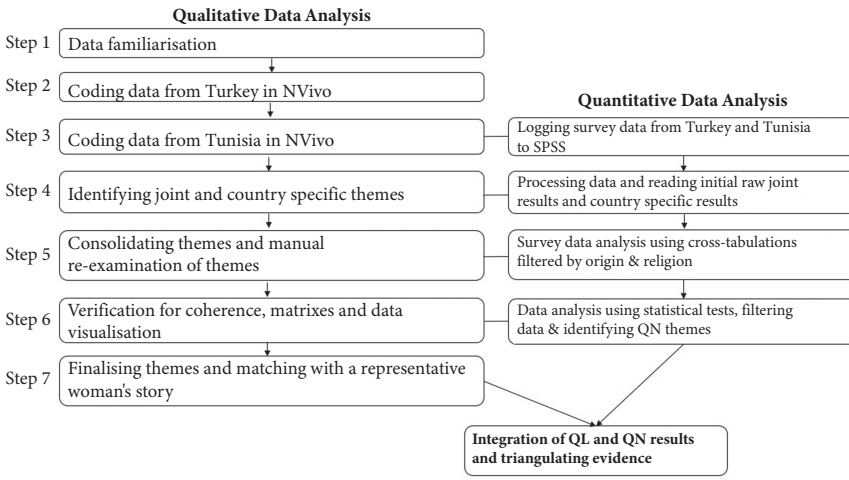
Code	Role	Organisation	Scope of work	Location
KII1	Head of VAW Programme	IO and GO	International	Lesotho
KII2	Protection Officer	NGO	National	Türkiye, Gaziantep
KII3	Emergency Coordinator and Psychosocial Officer	IO	National	Türkiye, Ankara
KII4	Psychologist and Team Leader	IO	Local	Türkiye, Izmir
KII5	Psychologist and Social Worker	NGO	National	Türkiye, Ankara
KII6	Head of Mission	INGO	International	Tunisia, Medenine
KII7	Project Coordinator	NGO	Local	Tunisia, Medenine
KII8	Chair	NGO	Local	Tunisia, Medenine
KII9	Psychologist	NGO	Local	Tunisia, Medenine
KII10	Former GBV Coordinator/Researcher	Former INGO/ Academia	International	UK, London/ International
KII11	GBV Coordinator	INGO	National	Pakistan
KII12	Former Protection Officer	IO	National	Tunisia
KII13	GBV Coordinator	INGO/FBO	National	Iraq
KII14	Executive Director	NGO	National	Türkiye/Syria
KII15	GBV Advisor	IO	International	Senegal
KII16	GBV and MHPSS Advisor	IO and GO	National	Lebanon

Key: GO – governmental organisation, IO – international organisation, INGO – international non-governmental organisation, NGO – non-governmental organisation, FBO – faith-based organisation

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APPENDIX 3

Integrated data analysis process



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APPENDIX 4

Results of psychological distress

A. The mean average of psychological distress among respondents

Participants	Overall (n = 38)		Levantine (n = 23)		Sub-Saharan (n = 15)		Muslim (n = 27)		Christian (n = 11)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Psychological distress (PD)	32.82	9.19	31.35	9.08	35.07	9.19	32.19	9.45	34.36	8.72

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B. Results of psychological distress: Means of the Kessler scale items by religion and profile of respondents

Participants/PD code		Tired	Anxious	Nervous	Hopeless	Restless	Cannot sit still	Depressed	All as effort	Nothing to cheer	Worthless
Muslim	Mean	3.85	3.63	2.85	2.96	3.52	3.11	3.3	3.26	3.15	2.56
	N	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
	Std. Deviation	1.099	1.275	1.46	1.556	1.553	1.251	1.382	1.289	1.167	1.601
Christian	Mean	3.64	3.45	3.27	3.09	4.27	3.55	3	3.18	3.45	3.45
	N	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
	Std. Deviation	1.362	1.635	1.191	1.446	1.009	1.753	1.265	1.537	0.82	1.293
Levantine (n=23)	Mean	3.83	3.57	2.78	2.91	3.35	2.96	3.13	3.17	3.17	2.48
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Std. Deviation	1.072	1.308	1.38	1.621	1.613	1.186	1.325	1.267	1.154	1.592
Sub-Saharan (n=15)	Mean	3.73	3.6	3.27	3.13	4.33	3.67	3.33	3.33	3.33	3.33
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	Std.	1.335	1.502	1.387	1.356	0.9	1.633	1.397	1.496	0.976	1.397

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Numerical results by item and religion of respondents

Item	Religion	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All the time
Feeling tired out for no good reason	Muslim	0	5	3	10	9
	Christian	1	1	3	2	4
	Total	1	6	6	12	13
Feeling anxious	Muslim	3	1	7	8	8
	Christian	2	1	3	0	5
	Total	5	2	10	8	13
Feeling so nervous that nothing could calm you down	Muslim	6	7	4	5	5
	Christian	1	1	5	2	2
	Total	7	8	9	7	7
Feeling hopeless	Muslim	7	4	6	3	7
	Christian	2	1	5	0	3
	Total	9	5	11	3	10
Feeling restless or fidgety	Muslim	5	3	2	7	10
	Christian	0	1	1	3	6
	Total	5	4	3	10	16
Feeling so restless you could not sit still	Muslim	3	6	7	7	4
	Christian	3	0	1	2	5
	Total	6	6	8	8	9
Feeling depressed	Muslim	3	6	5	6	7
	Christian	1	3	4	1	2
	Total	4	9	9	7	9
Feeling that everything was an effort	Muslim	2	7	6	6	6
	Christian	3	0	2	4	2
	Total	5	7	8	10	8
Feeling so sad that nothing could cheer you up	Muslim	1	8	9	4	5
	Christian	0	1	5	4	1
	Total	1	9	14	8	6
Feeling worthless	Muslim	11	4	3	4	5
	Christian	1	1	4	2	3
	Total	12	5	7	6	8

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APPENDIX 5

Religious background and practices reported by participants

Question	Response	Christian	Muslim	Levantine	Sub-Saharan	Total
Are you actively practising your religion?	Yes	10	26	23	13	36
	No	1	1	0	2	2
	Total	11	27	23	15	38
Is religion important in your life?	Yes	10	27	23	14	37
	Don't know	1	0	0	1	1
	Total	11	27	23	15	38
How often do you pray?	5 times a day	1	22	19	4	23
	Every day	9	2	1	10	11
	Sometimes	1	3	3	1	4
	Total	11	27	23	15	38
How often do you fast?	Yearly	3	16	13	6	19
	Monthly	3	1	1	3	4
	Weekly	3	10	9	4	13
	Never	2	0	0	2	2
	Total	10	27	23	15	38
How often do you go the mosque/ church?	Every few months	3	5	5	2	7
	Monthly	0	4	4	0	4
	Weekly	0	6	4	3	7
	Never	8	12	10	10	20
	Total	11	27	23	15	38
How often do you read/listen to the Bible/Qur'an or another holy book?	Monthly	1	0	0	1	1
	Weekly	2	4	4	2	6
	Daily	5	18	16	7	23
	Never	3	5	3	5	8
	Total	11	27	23	15	38

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APPENDIX 6

Results of religious coping scale

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Means of the B-RCOPE items

Positive Religious Coping (PRC)								
Participants/PRC Item		**Looked for a stronger connection with God**	**Sought God's love and care**	**Sought help from God in letting go of my anger**	**Tried to put my plans into action together with God**	**Tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me**	**Asked forgiveness for my sins**	**Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems**
Muslim (n=27)	Mean	3.74	3.96	3.67	3.78	3.89	3.93	3.63
	N	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
	Std. Deviation	0.712	0.192	0.620	0.641	0.424	0.267	0.839
Christian (n=11)	Mean	3.27	3.82	3.09	3.73	3.55	3.55	2.36
	N	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
	Std. Deviation	1.009	0.603	1.136	0.905	0.934	0.934	1.362
Levantine (n=23)	Mean	3.74	4.00	3.70	3.78	3.91	3.96	3.65
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Std. Deviation	0.752	0.000	0.635	0.671	0.417	0.209	0.885
Sub-Saharan (n=15)	Mean	3.40	3.80	3.20	3.73	3.60	3.60	2.67
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	Std. Deviation	0.910	0.561	1.014	0.799	0.828	0.828	1.291

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Negative Religious Coping (NRC)								
Participants/NRC Item		**Wondered whether God had abandoned me**	**Felt punished by God for my lack of devotion**	**Wondered what I did for God to punish me**	**Questioned God's love for me**	**Wondered whether my church/mosque had abandoned me**	**Decided the devil made this happen**	**Questioned the power of God**
Muslim (n=27)	Mean	1.52	2.26	1.67	1.48	1.52	2.33	1.19
	N	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
	Std. Deviation	0.935	1.059	0.784	1.014	1.014	1.209	0.681
Christian (n=11)	Mean	2.27	1.82	2.00	1.55	1.55	1.73	1.91
	N	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
	Std. Deviation	1.348	1.250	1.414	1.036	1.214	1.272	1.300
Levantine (n=23)	Mean	1.43	2.35	1.74	1.35	1.35	2.26	1.00
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Std. Deviation	0.843	1.071	0.810	0.885	0.775	1.176	0.000
Sub-Saharan (n=15)	Mean	2.20	1.80	1.80	1.73	1.80	2.00	2.00
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	Std. Deviation	1.320	1.146	1.265	1.163	1.373	1.363	1.309

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B. Numerical results by B-RCOPE item and religion of respondents

Item	Religion	Not at all	Some-what	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total
1. Looked for a stronger connection with God.	Christian	1	1	3	6	11
	Muslim	1	1	2	23	27
	Total	2	2	5	29	38
2. Sought God's love and care.	Christian	0	1	0	10	11
	Muslim	0	0	1	26	27
	Total	0	1	1	36	38
3. Sought help from God in letting go of my anger.	Christian	2	0	4	5	11
	Muslim	0	2	5	20	27
	Total	2	2	9	25	38
4. Tried to put my plans into action together with God.	Christian	1	0	0	10	11
	Muslim	1	0	3	22	26
	Total	2	0	3	32	37
5. Tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation.	Christian	1	0	2	8	11
	Muslim	0	1	1	25	27
	Total	1	1	3	33	38
6. Asked forgiveness for my sins.	Christian	1	0	2	8	11
	Muslim	0	0	2	25	27
	Total	1	0	4	33	38
7. Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems.	Christian	5	0	3	3	11
	Muslim	2	0	4	21	27
	Total	7	0	7	24	38
8. Wondered whether God had abandoned me.	Christian	5	1	2	3	11
	Muslim	18	3	2	2	25
	Total	23	4	4	5	36
9. Felt punished by God for my lack of devotion.	Christian	7	0	1	2	10
	Muslim	8	8	7	4	27
	Total	15	8	8	6	37
10. Wondered what I did for God to punish me.	Christian	7	0	0	3	11
	Muslim	13	9	2	1	25
	Total	20	9	3	4	36
11. Questioned God's love for me.	Christian	8	1	1	1	11
	Muslim	21	2	1	3	27
	Total	29	3	2	4	38
12. Wondered whether my church/mosque had abandoned me.	Christian	9	0	0	2	11
	Muslim	20	3	1	3	27
	Total	29	3	1	5	38
13. Decided the devil made this happen.	Christian	8	0	1	2	11
	Muslim	8	10	1	8	27
	Total	16	10	2	10	38
14. Questioned the power of God.	Christian	7	0	2	2	11
	Muslim	24	0	1	1	26
	Total	31	0	3	3	37

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APPENDIX 7

Self-reported extent of religious coping

Results to question: 'To what extent have your religious/faith and/or spiritual beliefs and practices helped you in coping with experience of discrimination/abuse?' (where 1 is none of the time and 10 is all the time)

Means of religious coping score (1—none of the time, 10—all time)			
	Mean	**No**	**Std. Deviation**
All	8.987	38	2.0811
Christian	7.909	11	3.145
Muslim	9.426	27	1.2913
Sub-Saharan	8.167	15	2.8009
Levantine	9.522	23	1.2384

Religion			
Score	**Christian**	**Muslim**	**Total**
1	1	0	1
5	2	1	3
6	1	0	1
6.5	0	1	1
7	0	1	1
8	0	1	1
9	0	2	2
10	7	21	28
Total	11	27	38

Region of origin			
Score	**Levantine**	**Sub-Saharan**	**Total**
1	0	1	1
5	1	2	3
6	0	1	1
6.5	0	1	1
7	1	0	1
8	1	0	1
9	1	1	2
10	19	9	28
Total	23	15	38

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APPENDIX 8

Results of post-traumatic growth

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A. Means of the post-traumatic growth inventory items (PTGI, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 1996)

Participants/ PTGI code		Defined priorities	Appre-ciation	Self-reliance	Count on people	New Rela-tions	Express emo-tions	Handle difficul-ties	Accep-tance	Appre-ciating days	New oppor-tunities	Stronger faith	Stronger self
Muslim	Mean	3.30	2.96	3.56	1.74	2.81	2.59	3.19	2.74	2.93	3.30	3.67	3.63
	N	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
	Std. Deviation	1.031	1.255	1.013	1.095	1.111	1.248	1.075	1.163	1.207	0.912	0.784	0.884
Christian	Mean	2.09	2.45	2.64	2.18	2.45	2.36	2.73	2.27	2.82	2.27	3.18	3.18
	N	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
	Std. Deviation	1.221	1.293	1.362	1.401	1.214	1.433	1.489	1.489	1.401	1.272	1.250	1.250
Levantine (n=23)	Mean	3.26	2.87	3.74	1.70	2.91	2.57	3.26	2.83	2.87	3.30	3.70	3.65
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Std. Deviation	1.096	1.290	0.752	1.063	1.083	1.308	1.010	1.114	1.254	0.974	0.765	0.885
Sub-Saharan (n=15)	Mean	2.47	2.73	2.60	2.13	2.40	2.47	2.73	2.27	2.93	2.53	3.27	3.27
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	Std. Deviation	1.246	1.280	1.404	1.356	1.183	1.302	1.438	1.438	1.280	1.187	1.163	1.163

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B. Numerical results by item and religion of respondents

Item (possible areas of growth and change)	Religion	Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total
My priorities about what is important in life	Christian	5	2	2	2	11
	Muslim	3	2	6	16	27
	Total	8	4	8	18	38
An appreciation for the value of my own life	Christian	3	4	0	4	11
	Muslim	6	3	4	14	27
	Total	9	7	4	18	38
A feeling of self-reliance	Christian	4	0	3	4	11
	Muslim	3	1	1	22	27
	Total	7	1	4	26	38
Knowing that I can count on people in times of trouble	Christian	6	0	2	3	11
	Muslim	16	6	1	4	27
	Total	22	6	3	7	38
I developed new relationships with helpful others	Christian	3	3	2	3	11
	Muslim	4	7	6	10	27
	Total	7	10	8	13	38
A willingness to express my emotions	Christian	5	1	1	4	11
	Muslim	8	4	6	9	27
	Total	13	5	7	13	38
Knowing I can handle difficulties	Christian	4	1	0	6	11
	Muslim	2	7	2	16	27
	Total	6	8	2	22	38
Being able to accept the way things work out	Christian	6	0	1	4	11
	Muslim	6	4	8	9	27
	Total	12	4	9	13	38
Appreciating each day	Christian	3	2	0	6	11
	Muslim	5	5	4	13	27
	Total	8	7	4	19	38
New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise	Christian	4	3	1	3	11
	Muslim	2	2	9	14	27
	Total	6	5	10	17	38
I have a stronger religious faith	Christian	2	1	1	7	11
	Muslim	1	2	2	22	27
	Total	3	3	3	29	38
I discovered that I am stronger than I thought I was	Christian	2	1	1	7	11
	Muslim	2	1	2	22	27
	Total	2	2	3	29	38

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APPENDIX 9

Results of T-test for equality of means (means difference in variance)

	PRC	NRC	PTGI	PD	Brief-RCOPE
Levantine	26.74	11.48	36.65	31.35	38.22
Sub-Saharan	24	13.33	31.8	35.07	37.33
Mean difference	**2.739****	**−1.855**	**4.852**	**−3.717**	**0.884**
Muslim	26.59	11.96	36.41	32.19	38.56
Christian	23.36	12.82	30.64	34.36	36.18
Mean difference	**3.23***	**−0.86***	**5.77**	**−2.18**	**2.37**

*indicates statistical significance at the 10% level
**at the 5% level

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APPENDIX 10

Mean averages of the online participants' responses

On a scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much) to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

#	Statement	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Count
1	Religion, faith and/or spirituality can support survivors' healing	1	5	**4.08**	1.06	24
2	Religion, faith and/or spirituality can hinder survivors' healing	1	5	**2.96**	1.30	24
3	Accounting for survivors' psychosocial needs is important	3	5	**4.88**	0.45	24
4	Accounting for survivors' religious/faith/spiritual needs is important	2	5	**4.13**	0.95	24
5	Psychosocial needs and religious/faith/spiritual needs of survivors are connected	1	5	**4.08**	1.14	24
6	Integration of religion/faith/spirituality and responses risks humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality	1	5	**3.00**	1.29	24

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APPENDIX 11

An integrated intersectional and socioecological analysis

Why an integrated analysis?

This analysis tool complements the conceptual framework (Figure 2.1) and proposes a faith-sensitive intersectional and socioecological analysis of resilience and vulnerability. It can be used in situational analysis, needs assessments, project design and planning, monitoring and evaluation and policy and strategy development.

An integrated intersectional and socioecological analysis suggests questions to identify risk and protective factors in VAWG among displaced populations with diverse intersecting identities. This tool can be adapted to context.

Aims of the tool:

- To help identify intersecting vulnerabilities and risks and resilience and protective factors of displaced individuals and communities at different stages of displacement
- To integrate sociocultural and religious factors into the interventions to better respond to socially diverse migrant groups.

How to conduct an integrated intersectional and socioecological analysis

To begin your analysis, start from discussing in your project teams and with the representatives of displaced populations the following questions:

Intersectional vulnerabilities

- Who is disadvantaged, excluded and targeted for abuse and exploitation? (consider people with different social identities associated with gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, legal status, age, religion, class, caste, ability, etc.)
- Who is advantaged and privileged and has power in relation to others?
- Who is at higher risk of VAWG in a specific context?
- What are the risks and causes of VAWG associated with different social identities (discussed above) at different levels (sub-questions below)?
  - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the individual and interpersonal level? (e.g. gender-related, class-related risks, etc.)
  - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the family level? (e.g. age-related risks, inter-generational norms, etc.)

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  - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the community level? (e.g. religion-related risks, other situational risks)
  - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the societal levels? (e.g. race-related risks, other contextual risks)
- What are the risks and causes of VAWG associated with social identities that you identified above at interpersonal, family, community and societal levels? (e.g. gender-related risks at the interpersonal level, religion-related risks at the community level and race-related risks at the societal level, etc.)
- What other forms of oppression are disadvantaged groups subjected to (beyond VAWG)?

Multidimensional resilience

- What are the protective factors and resources associated with different social identities at different levels (sub-questions below)?
  - At the interpersonal level, what protective factors and resources related to different social identities can support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. personal resources related to people's racial/ethnic belonging and age)
  - At the family level, what protective factors and resources related to different social identities can support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. family factors, inter-generational norms and resources specific to one's culture)
  - At the community level, what protective factors and resources related to different social identities can support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. local structures and cultural norms of protection and moral standards related one's gender, religious, or class identity)
  - At the societal level, what protective factors and resources centre around different social identities that support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. national symbols and traditions)

Integrated responses to VAWG

- What work is required to reduce risk factors to VAWG at different levels?
- What work is required to increase protective factors at different levels?
- How can faith actors at different socioecological levels address VAWG?

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APPENDIX 12

Integrating religion into gender analysis

Faith-sensitive gender analysis tool, adapts the Moser framework[1] to expand gender analysis to take into account religious factors in the VAWG experience and to enable a better understanding of gender dynamics. Religion is part of the social fabric. It interacts with gender and with social and cultural norms and tradition.

The list of questions below can be used to enrich your gender analysis and assessments. Use data collected to inform your programme, policy and strategy. Reflect the findings from your faith-sensitive gender analysis in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

Gender roles

- What roles do women and men play in their families, neighbourhoods, communities and society?
- How do religion (religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organizations), culture and tradition shape gender roles (of women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds) at different stages of forced displacement (in transit and refuge)?
  - What religious beliefs and cultural norms shape expectations about what activities, work and responsibilities women and men have in the house and community?
  - How does religion help reproduce, negotiate, or balance gender roles and power dynamics in the household?
- What are the individual and community attitudes towards a woman undertaking work?
- What are the social norms concerning sex segregation in a specific context?
- What kind of leadership positions do men and women occupy in the community?
- What are the attitudes towards women taking leadership roles?

Access to and control over resources

- What resources do women and men have access to, and what control over them, at interpersonal, family, community and societal levels?
- How do religion (religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisations), culture and tradition (expectations and norms) enable and restrict access to and control over resources and services for women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds at different stages of forced displacement?

[1] Moser, C. (1993) Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training. London: Routledge.

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- What decisions do women and men make in the household? Who decides what? (e.g. in terms of household management, marriage matters, accessing work, education and health, transportation)
- How do men's and women's participation in faith-based groups affect their access to resources, care and support from other community members?

Gender needs

- What practical and strategic gender needs do women and men have at individual, interpersonal, family, community and societal levels?
- How do religion (religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisations), culture and tradition shape gendered needs (of women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds) at different stages of forced displacement?
- What are the practical/short-term gender needs of women and girls in the family, community and society? (e.g. to meet their immediate needs such as food security, access to water, shelter, education, health care)?
- What are the strategic/long-term gender needs of people (e.g. advocacy against discrimination, VAWG prevention, financial inclusion, access to rights, etc.)?
- What religious resources can help women and men meet their needs?

Notes:

- Practical gender needs are context-specific immediate perceived necessity, e.g. primary health care, family planning, reproductive health, mental health, antenatal care, education, vocational training, water provision, health care and employment.
- Strategic gender needs are long-term needs which, if met, can transform subordinate positions and lead to empowerment e.g. equal access to training, rights to land, rights to inheritance, prevention of violence, etc.

Victimization

- How do religious factors and faith actors contribute to VAWG at different stages of displacement (in transit, refuge)?
- How do religious beliefs, practices, culture and tradition drive attitudes and behaviours that lead to abuse and discrimination against women and girls?
- What are the gendered forms of religious discrimination or spiritual violence?
- Who is worst affected by VAWG underpinned by religious constructs (in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion, ability and other characteristics of marginalization)?

Protection

- How do religious factors and faith actors contribute to protecting women and girls of different backgrounds from violence at different stages of displacement (e.g. in transit, refuge)?
  - How do religious beliefs and practices, culture and tradition drive protective attitudes and behaviours that help prevent VAWG?

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  - How does religion foster resilience of displaced individuals and communities (what mindset, actions and feelings support them)?
- Who is best protected from VAWG by religious resources and who is left out and why? (in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion, ability and other characteristics of marginalization)

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APPENDIX 13

Integrating faith sensitivity into GBV minimum standards

The GBV minimum standards in the humanitarian sector also require integration of faith sensitivity. Table A.13.1 introduces a non-exhaustive list of suggestions of how each GBV standard could integrate faith considerations.

Table A.13.1 *Introducing faith sensitivity to GBV minimum standards*

	GBV Minimum Standard	***Faith sensitivity***
1.	GBV Guiding Principles	• Train faith actors involved in VAWG prevention and response on a survivor-centred approach promoting confidentiality, safety, non-discrimination and respect for women and girls
2.	Women's and girls' participation and empowerment	• Involve women and girls of different ages and abilities from faith groups as partners in humanitarian response and across all stages of design and implementation of VAWG interventions • Train informal women leaders of faith groups to support survivors' access to quality services • Listen to women's voices! Recognise women's and girls' sources of power in displacement situations, including their faith as a source of strength, coping and healing • Support women's and girls' religious coping and power from within • Ensure women's and girls' religious beliefs are respected by humanitarian staff • Address faith-insensitive practices and/or religious prejudice within your interventions
3.	Staff care and support	• Ensure informal and formal faith leaders (women and men) are trained to address VAWG safely in their communities • Recognize that faith can be a coping mechanism for staff to support their well-being. Ensure religious coping mechanisms are respected and supported by non-discrimination and inclusion

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	GBV Minimum Standard	*Faith sensitivity*
4.	Collection and use of GBV survivor data	• Include faith-based organisations involved in survivor data collection in capacity-building activities to ensure data is only collected if it can be safely and ethically stored, analysed and shared
5.	Health care for GBV survivors	• Train health-care providers to recognise that survivors have a diverse range of religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices in relation to health, which vary between cultures and religions and between individuals within cultural and religious groups • Train health-care providers to recognise that religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices can impact survivors' help-seeking behaviours, health-care access and medical treatment preferences, following VAWG exposure
6.	Psychosocial support	• Provide psychosocial support in faith-sensitive ways • Account for and support religious coping strategies among survivors of faith, such as meaning-making, reappraisal of life events, and achieving closure to overcome traumatic experiences • Recognise the impact of religious coping on survivors' well-being, and on their positive and negative coping strategies • Work with faith leaders to offer pastoral care to people of faith expressing such needs
7.	GBV case management	• Train humanitarian FBOs involved in VAWG/GBV case management to provide safe and quality services
8.	Referral systems	• Train faith actors to provide psychological first aid, map quality services and offer safe referral pathways to survivors confidentially (using a survivor-centred approach)
9.	Women's and girls' safe spaces	• Help places of worship to develop capacities to offer safe women's and girls' services in an inclusive and accessible manner • Encourage faith institutions and places of worship to develop activities that promote survivors' empowerment and healing, drawing on the institutions' and places' intellectual and material religious resources

continued

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Table A.13.1 *continued*

	GBV Minimum Standard	*Faith sensitivity*
10.	Safety and risk mitigation	• Involve faith actors in efforts to integrate risk mitigation into humanitarian responses and safety plans and their implementation • Establish feedback mechanisms in collaboration with faith actors • Ensure relevant and trusted faith actors are informed about VAWG standard operating procedures (SOPs) and other security concerns
11.	Justice and legal aid	• Train faith actors, including informal women's groups, about the legal rights of displaced survivors and how to connect with legal and justice actors to support survivors' rights and access to justice
12.	Dignity kits, cash, and voucher assistance	• Faith actors to provide dignity kits and financial and material support to survivors in places of worship and through grassroots mobilisation, utilising pathways of religious donations and faith-based charity
13.	Economic empowerment and livelihoods	• Sensitise FBOs to mobilise more support to women to strengthen their resilience and decrease vulnerability from exploitation by using eg Islamic social finance instruments (charity, free-interest loans, etc.)
14.	GBV co-ordination	• Better co-ordinate with trusted faith actors and include them in co-ordination efforts in VAWG interventions and procedures
15.	Assessment, monitoring, and evaluation	• Train FBOs and other relevant faith actors to ensure they thoroughly consider the ethics of data collection in VAWG research so as not to harm survivors and communities • Collect data (and advise FBOs similarly) only if existing data is unavailable and when new data is needed to inform/improve VAWG/GBV interventions
16.	Transforming systems and social norms	• Build on religious resources and theology to develop transformative approaches to VAWG in faith communities • Engage faith actors in tackling harmful social norms • Draw on faith values when working to tackle misconceptions about women and promote their position

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