Seeking safety from male partner violence in Turkey: Toward a context-informed perspective on women’s decisions and actions

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Abstract
Women’s stay/leave decision-making in violent relationships has become a subject of investigation in psychology over the last few decades. Despite making significant contributions to the understanding of how women’s psychological processes shape their responses to violence, much of this research has lacked a contextualized approach. The present study aimed to provide a feminist context-informed examination of women’s decision-making and safety-seeking processes. Twelve women who had experiences of violence in their marital relationships were interviewed individually. The study was carried out in Istanbul, Turkey, and all participants were socioeconomically disadvantaged women. A constructivist grounded theory approach was used for the data analysis. The results indicated that women’s helplessness, beyond being a psychological construct, was a reality shaped by the conditions of marginalization in their lives. More than being related to the experience of psychological trauma, the women’s narratives revealed the disempowering barriers associated with the lack of socioeconomic and institutional resources. Under these circumstances, regardless of their decisions to stay or leave, the women underlined their ongoing strategic efforts to ensure their safety, as mainly strengthened by the relational support available to them.

Keywords
marital violence, intimate partner violence, stay/leave decision-making, safety seeking, low-income women, Turkey

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Regarding women’s stay/leave decision-making processes in violent relationships, many psychological studies utilize a trauma model as an overarching framework in explaining women’s difficulties in separating themselves from violent partners (Baird et al., 2021; Tseris, 2013). Psychological outcomes of violence have often been viewed as solely created by the experiences of violence itself, and women’s responses and actions have been examined with mental health concepts such as trauma, learned helplessness, or coping (Goodman et al., 2009). These formulations, however, often overlook women’s struggles with structural and systemic constraints and do not consider how different women, depending on their social locations, react differently to violence and the diverse needs they have (Baird et al., 2021). In contrast, feminist perspectives and practices have underscored that the individual trauma of violence becomes a part of women’s collective experiences of systemic oppression (Skoloff & Dupont, 2005). The intersectional nature of violence has been especially marked for disadvantaged women (Baird et al., 2021; Goodman et al., 2009). Thus, feminist-informed perspectives reveal the complex relationships between social power, choice, and mental health. Women’s experiences of violence and their reactions to it are viewed as being shaped within the realities generated by the multiplicity of their social locations and the broader structural context (Barrios et al., 2021).

This article is based on a feminist perspective and aims to analyze the decision-making and safety-seeking processes of a socioeconomically disadvantaged group of women living in Istanbul, Turkey. Thus, it particularly speaks to the experiences of low-income urban women living in a conservative country where political determination and systemic infrastructure to combat violence are largely limited. I investigate whether women experience structural and societal constraints while they struggle to achieve their safety and, if so, what these constraints are and how they shape women’s actions and decisions. Besides, I examine how and to what degree women can transform their circumstances to be safer and have more control over their lives. Based on these goals, the research aims to offer an understanding of women’s experiences of violence and navigating safety in an urban locale in Turkey.

**Barriers to safety**

Studies suggest that women, while responding to violence and seeking safety, strategically consider multiple complexities concerning their lives and well-being (Baird et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2015). In this sense, accessing support services, leaving violent relationships, maintaining a separate life, and achieving safety have been reported as significantly challenging for many women due to various systemic barriers (Goodman et al., 2009). Limited availability and accessibility of support services, anticipation of further violence after separation, cultural barriers, economic constraints, housing concerns, or child welfare concerns have been documented as key intersecting factors shaping women’s responses to violence (e.g., Barrios et al., 2021; Goodman et al., 2009; Kelly, 2009; Meyer, 2016). Studies also demonstrate that the actions women take to seek support and escape violence do not always result in achieving safety but, in contrast,
may create further risks in their lives (e.g., escalation of violence, child custody battles, homelessness, social isolation, unemployment) (Thomas et al., 2015).

In addition, although the risks of seeking safety exist for all women to a certain extent, barriers and trade-offs have been reported to be more substantial for minoritized women (i.e., women of color, immigrant/refugee women, women with disabilities) with fewer social and economic resources (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Skoloff & Dupont, 2005). Considering factors such as poverty, social exclusion, language barriers, cultural pressures, or systemic racism, the chances of disadvantaged women to access effective support and opportunities have been shown to be very slim (Baird et al., 2021; Barrios et al., 2021; Campbell & Mannell, 2016). Similarly, in lower-income countries where effective structural responses to gender-based violence are markedly insufficient and gender inequalities are highly prevalent, it has been illustrated that women’s ability to protect themselves from violence and create safety in their lives is often extremely limited (Mannell et al., 2016; Schuler et al., 2008).

The country context

Intimate partner violence has been an ongoing nationwide problem in Turkey, affecting 38% of ever-partnered women (General Directorate on the Status of Women [KSGM], 2014). A femicide watch initiative in Turkey reported that 2073 women were killed in the country between 2016 and 2020, mostly by their partners (We Will Stop Femicide Platform, n.d.). These numbers primarily point to the lack of violence prevention efforts and inadequate system responses (Ekal, 2017). Although there have been some positive changes in legislation in the last few decades in support of women (i.e., criminalization of marital rape, enforcement of measures such as the authorization of the police to issue immediate protective orders or provision of shelter services), in recent years the Erdogan government has shown an increasing unwillingness to acknowledge and respond to the problem (Atuk, 2020). For instance, a presidential decree was issued in 2021 to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. As this treaty has been utilized as a legal framework in preventing and combatting gender-based violence since its ratification in 2011, this decision put women in Turkey at a greater risk of being exposed to violence.

Yet, even before the withdrawal, the efforts to implement violence prevention laws that the Convention required were limited (Toktas & Diner, 2015). A national survey, for example, showed that in only 19% of the cases in which women sought police assistance, the mandatory legal steps were followed (i.e., taking perpetrators into custody or referring victims to shelters) (KSGM, 2014). Furthermore, Kara and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that two-thirds of police officers did not perceive intervening into domestic violence incidents as one of their primary duties. As another significant example, although more than 1400 women’s shelters around the country were required by law, the actual number was reported to be 137 in 2017, and most were in urban areas (Ekal, 2017).

In the context of these systemic barriers, only 11% of women who experienced intimate partner violence were found to seek institutional support (KSGM, 2014). It has been demonstrated that women often decide to disclose violence only if there is
an escalation of its severity; otherwise, they have been found to be less likely to seek support (Akadli-Ergocmen et al., 2013). In addition, not having any income and housing alternatives were reported as fundamental reasons for staying in violent marriages (Alan et al., 2016). In a study of women’s shelters in Turkey, Sallan-Gul (2013) also demonstrated that 86% of the women staying in shelters had no previous employment history or no current income, which indicates a relationship between poverty and violence.

**Study objectives**

This article reports a qualitative study conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, that aimed to investigate: i) women’s individual experiences prior to separation with a focus on their stay/leave decision-making processes; ii) their efforts to seek safety both before and after separation; and iii) their experiences of adversity and psychological recovery after leaving. Based on these objectives, this study primarily aimed to achieve an understanding of both individual and contextual factors and processes underlying women’s responses to violence and their emotional recovery. The specific objective of this article, on the other hand, is to examine how low-income women manage to navigate safety from violence in the context of structural and systemic barriers.

**Method**

**Participants and recruitment process**

Twelve women were recruited using purposive convenience sampling. While not a focus of this article, as one goal of the study was to examine women’s post-separation experiences, only women who had been separated from their violent partners for at least two months before the interview date were recruited.

For recruitment purposes, a study information letter was sent to an organization that provides services to women who experience intimate partner violence. Employees at the organization were invited to share the letter with their clients. The letter was also distributed through a mailing list consisting of psychologists and social service providers. Six women were recruited from those who received support from the organization, and the remaining six participants were reached through the colleagues in the email group. Women who agreed to be contacted were called on the phone and invited to the study. All 12 women who were initially approached agreed to take part in the research.

I introduced myself to the participants during the initial contact and informed them that I was a PhD researcher and a clinical psychologist. Then, the study objectives and what their participation would involve were explained. They were informed that the study aimed to examine: i) their personal experiences of staying in and leaving violent relationships; ii) their decision-making processes; iii) their responses and actions to keep themselves safe both before and after separation; and iv) their experiences of adversity and
psychological recovery after separation. A written informed consent form was completed by each participant before the first interview session. Approval of the research was obtained by the Institutional Review Board from Bogazici University.

The sample included women from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. One woman chose not to disclose her place of residence due to safety concerns. All other participants were living in Istanbul during the time of the study, mostly in impoverished neighborhoods. All of them had grown up in low-income and traditional religious families. Nine women were not allowed to pursue their education after primary school, and the other three completed high school. Four women were forcibly married before the age of 18. Others had arranged marriages between the ages of 18 and 34. One woman was unemployed, and all the others were working in low-paid service jobs. The age range of women was between 28 and 50 years old. All women had at least one child and at most four children. The age range of the children was from 2 to 24 years old. More details on the participants’ demographic characteristics are available in the Supplemental File.

**Interview procedures**

Two in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, and they lasted from two to three hours. The second interviews were conducted within four to six weeks after the first interviews. All interviews but one were carried out in-person at the participants’ homes, as preferred by them. One participant was interviewed over the phone due to her safety concerns. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were carried out in Turkish, and the quotations below were translated from Turkish to English.

The main reason for conducting two interviews with each woman was to gather in-depth information about women’s experiences both before and after separation. It was considered that collecting women’s stories in a single interview would be practically challenging. Therefore, the first interview primarily aimed to collect information on women’s experiences before the termination of their relationships and the second interview aimed to examine their experiences after leaving. It should be noted, however, that women reflected on their experiences before and after separation spontaneously during both interviews.

While the interviews mostly proceeded in an informal way, there was a set of questions to explore the key aspects of women’s stories concerning the research aims. The first interview included broader questions about participants’ backgrounds and their current lives (e.g., family and upbringing experiences, social life, employment experiences). Understanding the context of their marriages and their decision-making was also central to the first interview. These issues were explored through questions about their emotional and practical responses to violence or their experiences and feelings that led them toward the decision to stay or leave. The second interview aimed to investigate women’s post-separation processes in relation to their experiences of psychological recovery and well-being.
Data analysis

As the conceptual background of this research study relies on feminist approaches, Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) was regarded as a compatible methodology (Charmaz, 2017). Feminist research processes prioritize the experiences of marginalized people and aim to highlight inequalities and injustices affecting their lives (Charmaz, 2017). Similarly, CGT is defined as an open-ended method that includes interpretive and reflexive strategies to attain a critical understanding of how existing meanings in the data emerge (Charmaz, 2016). Thus, CGT fosters a comprehensive understanding of the processes described in the data and invites researchers to examine social and structural factors affecting individual processes.

As specified by CGT, three steps, namely initial, focused, and theoretical coding, were followed in the data analysis. MAXQDA was used for data coding. In the initial coding phase, the narratives were sorted out into meaningful fragments, which was done through a sentence-by-sentence coding strategy. Codes such as “lacking educational opportunities”, “experiencing abandonment”, or “asking for help” were produced at this phase. The next step involved constant comparison, in which the initial codes were grouped based on their meanings and frequencies. For example, “being denied help” was identified as a common theme and the initial codes such as “being alone” or “experiencing abandonment” were merged into this theme. During the final step, key categories were developed through further integration of the codes. By that means the focused codes created in the previous phase were further reorganized and the code hierarchies were clarified. “Struggling with helplessness” and “navigating hopes” were two overarching themes common in all narratives. Memo-writing was also practiced for improving a reflexive interaction with the data. Defined as “methodological self-consciousness” by Charmaz (2017, p. 39), memo-writing enabled me to work through my influence on the research process. In what follows, pseudonyms are used for the participants.

Reflexivity

As a feminist researcher and clinical psychologist, I consider this research to be an advocacy tool that aims to contribute to women’s collective efforts to seek safety and justice in the face of violence and systemic oppression. During this research, however, I often experienced difficulties in balancing these two identities. It was sometimes challenging to adapt the communication style that I often utilize in my clinical practice, which mostly involves the language of feelings and internal realities, to the research context. This occasionally created tension in the interviews; a striking moment, for instance, was when a participant strongly reacted to one of my reflections, which reduced the complexity of her narrative to an internal feeling state (see the first quote by “Nermin” in the following page, or, alternatively, see the first quote by “Nermin” in the subsection “Struggling with helplessness”).

Furthermore, I constantly found myself in a place of being both an outsider and an insider. Considering that I am a woman from a working-class family with a conservative upbringing and that I have had experiences of gender-based violence, I felt a
considerable familiarity with the participants’ experiences and their social settings. I was open about this familiarity during the interviews. As I experienced it, this conversational reciprocity helped me to build a better alliance with the participants. Still, I was cautious about what and how much I shared with the participants as I did not want to dominate their interviews with my experiences and feelings. Along with this position of familiarity, I was also conscious of my privileged status. I have been living in a middle-class setting, accessing higher education, and experiencing no employment difficulties or significant financial problems. The privileges I had separated my experiences from theirs. This simultaneous experience of familiarity and unfamiliarity was also perceived by the participants, which was articulated by one of them, Aysel: “I was expecting you to be different, formal, like the therapists on TV [laughing]. When I look at you, I see that you are like us and not like us.”

Findings
Two core themes, “struggling with helplessness” and “navigating hopes”, were identified in the narratives describing women’s overall processes of decision-making and seeking safety. These themes did not indicate a straightforward process from experiencing helplessness to building hope; rather, they were conceptualized as representing nonlinear processes. It appeared that the structural disadvantages in both women’s upbringing and current lives were the determining factors of their experiences. Along with their struggles, the women also highlighted their counteracting efforts to exert their power, exercise their agency, and manage to escape violence.

Struggling with helplessness
All the women in this study underlined the reality of helplessness in their lives due to multiple contextual challenges they faced while struggling to ensure their safety from violence. For instance, while elaborating on her experiences of staying in a violent marriage, Nermin, who was forcibly married at 15, strongly disagreed with defining helplessness as a subjective feeling. She rather described it as an actual condition resulting from her lack of socioeconomic and relational power: “I did not ‘feel’ helpless, I was helpless, it was the reality, not a feeling [expressed in anger, in response to the researcher’s comment, saying ‘you must have felt helpless’].” This major theme involved two subthemes, “questioning the affordability of leaving” and “encountering barriers”.

Questioning the affordability of leaving. While reflecting on why they could not consider leaving to be a safe option, all women emphasized their doubts about maintaining their lives independently. They explained that their disadvantaged upbringing and their consequent social, educational, and economic shortcomings became the basis of their experiences of disempowerment. These factors were also critical in their decision-making. For example, Canan, who grew up in a rural town, described this inexperience as follows:
I was like a farm chicken. I had never been out of the cage. I did not know where to go, whom to speak to, or what to do. Leaving him was one thing, but then what? . . . No education, no skills, no job, so no money.

Similarly, Aysel, who moved from a rural village to Istanbul when she got married, emphasized her lack of skills: “Imagine that you do not even know how to use a debit card. I was just like that. How can you think about leaving your husband?” This was also illustrated in the following statement by Hayat, a 50-year-old woman:

I was a home bird. I went everywhere with my mother . . . I did not have any experience outside my home. So, I did not have any courage. I knew that I needed to do something, but my options were limited. I did not have a job. I did not have a proper education.

Women’s decision-making, then, was always linked to their doubts about the practical possibility of sustaining their livelihood independently. Lale and Melek reported that financial dependence was a major impediment to their escape:

It is very important for a woman to believe that she can live by herself, but I had so many fears. It was not possible. My fears were all about the future . . . Can you do the grocery shopping? Can you pay your bills? . . . You ask these [questions], then, you sit down and stay. (Lale)

My earnings were too little to build a life for my children. There were so many things that I was worried about. I always thought, “At least, I do not pay the rent.” Paying the deposit, the rent . . . These were impossible to afford. (Melek)

These financial and practical worries about leaving also seemed to be accentuated with women’s concerns for their children’s well-being. Feride commented that ensuring the financial and housing stability of her children was the most pressing issue for her: “Your priority becomes your kids. I cannot let them starve. I cannot let them sleep in the streets . . . Well, there was violence, but, at least, they had a roof over their heads.” Similarly, Arzu stated that having children, due to the financial responsibilities, became a barrier to her escape: “If it was only me, I would have been able to run away much earlier. Without thinking about whether my money would be enough to take care of them, my life would certainly have been easier.” Nermin also reflected on why she could not leave years earlier:

I still ask myself, “Why did I not leave this man earlier?” My daughter reminds me why [laughing], “Mom, we were very young at that time, you remember?” . . . All my worries were about them. They were small, I was earning very little.

Considering the limited resources in their lives, their decision-making seemed to be associated with a question of sustaining a living for oneself and one’s children. While
staying was revealed as an indicator of disempowerment, the narratives showed that it was also an agentic choice to minimize the anticipated risks of further suffering.

Encountering barriers. The women stated that, despite their doubts, they tried to find solutions to their predicament either by seeking assistance from their families or through formal support. However, most of these attempts to find support failed. The women underlined that the barriers they encountered while seeking help left them without options to escape: ‘Neither your state nor your family [helps you]. You say, ‘This is my destiny.’ An impossible thing to accept, but you accept it’” (Nermin).

Rejection by families. Because the women lacked a steady income, relying on their family’s help, such as by moving in with them or getting help with childcare, was perceived as essential to escaping violence. Yeliz recalled her first attempt to leave a few years after getting married:

My son was very small, daycare was expensive. I had to work. I thought my mom could take care of him . . . I called her and she said “Okay, come back.” I left my son [with the husband’s family]. My plan was to find a job and then take him back.

Yet, after moving back in with her parents for a while, she was told by her father that she was not allowed to bring her son to live with them: “‘Don’t bring his son,’ this was what he said [crying]. The worst thing in life is helplessness, I had no other choice, I returned for the sake of my son.” This experience was described as a shared experience by several women. Reyhan, who was forcibly married to her cousin at the age of 14, stated how her father refused to take care of her son: “We stayed at my father’s house for a few days . . . Do you know what he did? He took my son away from me and gave him to my uncle [her father-in-law].” Similarly, Oya and Arzu, who were also victims of forced marriage, emphasized being rejected by their families as a major barrier to their escape:

I begged her [refers to her own mother], “Let’s live together, look after my children, I will work.” . . . She did not want to, she refused. If she had accepted, I would have escaped from this man so much earlier. (Oya)

I begged my mother. “Please take me back.” . . . I ran away, went to my mother. They sent me back. My own family did not accept me. (Arzu)

Even when families allowed their daughters back into the family house, the women could only stay with them temporarily due to the abusive attitudes of the families. Pervin and Melek, for example, reported why they could not stay with their families:

My brother said, “You will live with this shame. We will not allow you to forget.” It is like I murdered somebody. I was in a wrong marriage and then tried to escape . . . They wanted to hurt me further. (Pervin)
My father accepted helping me but how? “You are a divorced woman . . . You cannot cross the street without my permission.” . . . I ran away from my husband but got stuck with a worse one. I felt [that there was] no option but to go back. (Melek)

**Barriers to formal help.** Institutional support was not available or accessible for some women. For example, Reyhan lived in a small rural village for nearly eight years: “I did not know about shelters. I did not know that you could go to the police. It would not have mattered if I had known because even today there are no women’s shelters there.” Similarly, Canan, who was also living in a small town, stated how she became aware of her options later in her marriage:

I saw it on TV; a woman was speaking about violence against women, shelters. She shared a phone number. I called . . . They told me that I could go to the police. They told me about shelters . . . I wish I knew these things before. I wish that the day women get married, public officials would give women a list of what to do, whom to call if violence occurs, just along with the marriage certificate.

Even when women were aware of the institutional resources, deciding to ask for formal assistance was difficult and raised many doubts. Feride, a Kurdish Alevi woman, explained why she refused to go to the police: “This state slaughters my people . . . They burned my grandmother’s house. It was impossible to ask them for help, how could you trust them?” As she was the only ethnic minority woman in the study, her reasons for not seeking help were exceptional, but her distrust of state institutions was shared by other women. Hayat, for example, reported that she was worried about being pitied or not believed: “My daughter gave me the number [of a shelter]. . . . I could not make the call for a long time . . . they would pity you or they would not believe you.” Similarly, Lale shared her concerns about asking for help from women’s shelters: “Here and there, you hear many bad stories about shelters or the police . . . People are talking [about shelters] ‘How bad those places are, how crowded, like prisons.’ I felt like I could not trust them.”

Confirming their distrust, many of the women’s initial efforts to get formal help from the police or the state shelters resulted in disappointment. The following narratives by Melek and Aysel, for example, show the troublesome attitudes held by the police and how it affected them:

They said, “Do you know what shelters are like? Horrible places, you cannot raise your daughter there.” You go there to get help, but you return in an even more desperate situation . . . The last time I asked for their help, I lost it. I screamed at them, “What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for me to be killed?” (Melek)

They tried to smooth over the situation, “This is your husband, we have nothing to do.” Then you think, “The police are not helping, so who will help me?” . . . Men are the same everywhere. Your husband is a man; the police are men. (Aysel)
Some women also reported that their attempts to get help from the state shelters failed. For example, when Reyhan was told that her 14-year-old son could not stay in the shelter with her, she emphasized how she felt resentful about not being protected:

I said to them that I would prefer to live with this monster than to leave my son behind . . . Your family, your government, they should protect you, but they throw you into the fire. My father also said, “You can come but not your bastard.”

Pervin shared her experience of staying in a shelter for one night and then going back:

It was so scary when I got there. It was so chaotic. There were nine beds in the same room. My son is very small, he is fearful, sad . . . They took our phones and everything, we had nothing left. I could not stay there. I could not feel safe there.

These experiences show how the state structures remained inaccessible, unavailable, and inefficient for many women in this study. This was a major obstacle to their safety-seeking efforts.

Navigating hopes

Despite their conditions of vulnerability, the women highlighted their efforts to increase their power and resources. Many said that they became more competent in social life mainly through their work experiences. Being supported by their children, giving up their expectations about their families, and developing individual strategies to navigate their ways to safety were also described as crucial aspects of the experiences that facilitated their decision to leave. This theme consisted of three subthemes: “growing connections”, “being supported by children”, and “resisting disappointments”.

Growing connections. The women emphasized their increasing involvement in everyday social practices and social interactions, which mainly developed through their work experiences, as essential to their efforts to ensure their safety. However, except for a few women, it did not indicate increased economic power; their low-wage jobs did not lift them above the poverty line. Nonetheless, the skills women gained through their employment brought them a sense of power and agency. Aysel, for instance, stated the role of her employment in her process of “becoming smarter”, which indicated a gradual change in her life towards gaining greater control:

I knew nothing, a naïve woman from a small village. Going to work, talking with my coworkers, I became smarter, my eyes opened through the years . . . Aysel [refers to herself in the third person] learned how to withdraw money from an ATM, she had her smartphone, she had her credit card [laughing]. I changed the password of my debit card, so that he could not use it anymore.
The narratives below also describe how working can provide women with significant opportunities to interact with supportive others, which leads to a sense of agency and hope:

I was going to people’s houses for cleaning . . . a retired teacher, she told me “Learn some skills, find a better job.” . . . it became my purpose . . . I found a job as a hairdresser, I was serving tea, cleaning around . . . then I learned manicure . . . I have always known that working was my ticket to escape . . . You learn from your customers, your coworkers. They appreciate you and you start looking at yourself differently. (Arzu)

She [the owner of the house she was cleaning] said, “No cleaning today, we will talk . . . I know your situation; these are your options.” It was the first time somebody talked to me about this . . . I still think about her, she changed my path. I was even talking to her in my mind while trying to leave, it was years later. (Reyhan)

Hence, along with the practical skills they gained through their jobs, having supportive contacts in their work environments enabled women to experience themselves more positively.

Several women also noted that working led them to contest the gender role dynamics at home and they felt more empowered to resist their husband’s control. For example, Hayat reported how working enabled her to re-appraise herself regarding her skills and to practice agency:

I begged him for his permission [to start working] . . . He finally allowed me. After starting to work, I stopped asking his permission for anything. You work hard and start to achieve something. People respect you; they listen to what you say. These things increase your confidence.

Oya also described a similar process where she started to question the value of her marriage along with her increasing economic power: “I turned into a man. Work, earn money, take care of the household . . . Then, why should I keep him as a husband? Is it for him to beat me more?”

These narratives, however, should be interpreted with caution; many women earned less than the minimum wage and had no financial or housing support from their families. Hence, although some viewed themselves as successfully maintaining their household expenses, they all still experienced doubts regarding their financial well-being.

Being supported by children. Several women underlined that the relational support they received from their children laid the foundation of their hopes. They reported that having resilient relationships with their children encouraged them to initiate further actions. Lale, for example, recalled an incident where her daughter tried to comfort her brother, which she articulated as a key moment in her decision to leave:
My son asked me: “Mom, how are we going to live without our belongings?” . . . My daughter told him: “Do not worry, our mom will work, she will buy a new TV, a new couch, and new toys.” [pause-crying] After that, I held onto them more tightly. I said, “I have my children, we will escape, we will be safe.”

Similarly, Arzu and Hayat highlighted how being supported by their children gradually became reassuring and strengthened their assertiveness in reacting to violence:

My daughter was always saying to me, “Mom, you do not need him. Please run away.” . . . Seeing her insistence and her maturity made me powerful. At last, I could say, whatever happens, I am leaving this man. (Arzu)

My brilliant children helped me. “Mom, we will survive, do not be hopeless, do not be sad, we are together in this.” They gave me courage. We planned everything together. (Hayat)

Some women reported that when their children got old enough to be able to contribute to the household budget, it made the idea of leaving more realistic. Melek stated that she asked her son for help and that having his support was crucial for her to leave:

I told him, “If you work, I will leave, only if we will support this family together. I do not want to return to this house again after I leave . . . It is only possible when we both work and put a piece of bread on the table.”

Similarly, Nermin articulated that she started feeling less concerned about the well-being of her children as her daughter grew older:

My daughter was old enough to take care of herself and her brother. She was cooking to sell food. I thought that even if I die today, they will take care of each other . . . 10 years ago, they were too small. Taking risks was difficult back then.

As shown in the narratives, for some women, receiving emotional and practical support from their children seemed to relieve their worries to a certain extent and eased their decision-making process.

Resisting disappointments. Finding the support that they needed was described as an arduous process in all the women’s narratives. Despite the barriers they faced, women also emphasized how they resisted these disempowering situations. For example, Feride did not perceive the police as a safe institution, and she did not have any support from her family. She underlined how she planned her escape under these circumstances and came up with alternative solutions:

Years of planning . . . If not the police, then go to your comrades [people from a political advocacy group]. If not that, do something else. In the end, I deceived him, it was a planned thing. I knew this man loved money more than anything else. I said, “Let’s
divorce. So, then, we can get my father’s pension.” I knew that running away would become easy after that.

Several women highlighted their ongoing efforts to reach out to appropriate formal support services, which eventually helped them to flee violence. Lale’s statement below exemplified this process:

I said to myself, “If I call the police, they will send us back just as they had done before.” We needed to find another solution. I saw it on TV, 183 [a national domestic violence helpline], and called them . . . They took us and placed us in a shelter. I am glad that I did not go to the police directly, it would have been the same as before.

Similarly, after failing to get help from the local police station in her small town, Canan explained that she took her chance in Istanbul, which worked to her benefit: “I arrived in Istanbul . . . The police said, ‘We cannot help, you should go to your local police station.’ . . . I yelled, ‘I will strap myself to this chair, I will not leave without getting help.’” She further explained how her phone contact with a women’s organization helped her to achieve this: “I did it because the women there gave me the courage. [They said] ‘When you go to the police, you have these rights. If they mistreat you, you can do these.’”

Several women also reported that they were able to get support from women’s organizations. After hearing about one of these agencies, Oya reached out to seek support: “I was not expecting anything, but they believed in me, they informed me about so many things, they wanted to hear what I had experienced.” She was able to leave her violent marriage with the support offered by this organization. Reyhan also articulated how the help that she got from the same organization was crucial for her escape:

I noted down their number on a piece of paper. I called them from a telephone box several times. They helped me to plan everything. They even helped me to buy my bus tickets. I wish there were more of them everywhere. Women need to know that they are not alone.

Lastly, for many women, the process of searching for more reliable support went hand in hand with an emerging emotional and practical need to distance themselves from their families. Melek and Yeliz addressed their decision to stop asking for help from their families:

You wish to find a shelter, but then your family does not want you there. I eventually figured out that this would not work. I said that I should take care of myself without their help. (Melek)

Your brother says, “You are a disgrace to your family.” Why? Did I kill somebody? No. I wanted their help to divorce my husband. I reduced my contact with them after a while. I realized that I was better off without them. (Yeliz)
Similarly, Pervin explained why she refused her brother’s offer to help and chose to act independently: “He said to me ‘Take all your belongings, we’re leaving.’ I refused. They were angry with me. I did not want to feel guilty anymore. I said to him ‘I will leave whenever I’m ready.’”

Overall, the women seemed to harness their disappointments to a search for available supports and to develop more independent safety-seeking alternatives. However, considering the systemic barriers they encountered, it was an effortful and complicated process.

Discussion

The present study utilized a contextualized approach to examining women’s experiences of decision-making and seeking safety in urban Turkey. The analysis showed how women situated their experiences of violence and their ways of dealing with it in the broader contextual and historical realities of their lives. The narratives addressed the reality of societal and systemic barriers in shaping their responses to marital violence, and they underscored that the women’s individual power to take control and free their life from violence was limited. The findings also indicated women’s strategic and resilient efforts to counteract the vulnerabilities in their lives. Despite the continuing doubts and adversities, these persistent efforts gradually helped women establish their hopes for building a better future.

Decision-making and safety in a disempowering context

The decision of staying in or leaving violent relationships has been commonly viewed as a binary decision, addressing an individual “choice” between harm and safety (Thomas et al., 2015). This perspective assumes a direct causal relationship between the psychological effects of violence on women and their decision-making. In that way, it can reduce women’s battle to a psychological one, marked by a struggle with traumatic outcomes of violence (Goodman et al., 2009; Tseris, 2013). In contrast, the findings highlight how the women recounted their decision-making beyond the intrapersonal psychological dynamics of violence. The women’s stories pointed to a broader oppressive system in Turkey, where their constant efforts to protect themselves were contextually constrained, and, thus, they were constantly left disempowered, both practically and emotionally.

These results mainly speak to the experiences of disadvantaged women and are in line with previous studies in Turkey and worldwide (Alan et al., 2016; Barrios et al., 2021; Meyer, 2016; Sallan-Gul, 2013). Staying, especially under the conditions of numerous intersecting disadvantages and the lack of safe options, was experienced as a question of risk management and harm minimization by the women, which involved “constant negotiations, small steps, and trade-offs to minimize the harm” (Goodman et al., 2009, p. 318). The women seemed to utilize strategies to mitigate their helplessness, their sense of isolation, and lack of support to be able to sustain their daily lives and ensure their survival.

While addressing the “inescapable” experiences of violence and marginalization, the women also described a series of positive transformative processes. Such
narratives of hope, addressed by a growing body of literature (e.g., Black et al., 2020; van Schalkwyk et al., 2014), demonstrated how women, despite their continuing vulnerabilities, were able to experience their agency and gain a relative degree of autonomy in their lives. Although women’s individual actions cannot remove the systemic barriers that they encounter, these findings contribute to the understanding of women’s processes to “navigate, resist, and triumph over adversity on a daily basis” (Black et al., 2020, p. 531).

In line with previous studies (Beecham, 2014), the findings also highlighted the essential role of employment in facilitating women’s coping with violence. Primarily through the relational support that they received within their workplace environments, the experience of working seemed to enable some women to create a network of support and improve their confidence in practical daily life skills (e.g., managing their money, interacting with institutions, communicating their needs). Besides, their ongoing efforts to search for reliable supports were identified as crucial aspects of women’s processes of change. As demonstrated by previous research in Turkey (Ekal, 2017), the narratives revealed how it was difficult and demanding for women to obtain the help that they needed, but how women were resourceful in fighting against these barriers.

The women also underscored the central role of their children in facilitating their decision-making. In the relevant literature, however, the mother-child relationships in the context of violence have generally focused on the damaging impact of violence on both children and mother-child interactions (Thiara & Humphreys, 2014). Although the adverse outcomes that violence causes for children are undeniable, the current study showed how children can be supportive of their mothers in the face of adversities and contribute to their mothers’ decision-making. This finding provided evidence for a strengths-based framework of mother-child interactions in the context of violence.

**Limitations**

This study also has limitations. First, all the women in this study reported that they sought assistance at various times throughout their marriages. However, as illustrated by previous research, very few women in Turkey who have experiences of violence ask for informal or formal help (Akadli-Ergocmen et al., 2013). Therefore, the results may represent the experiences of only a small number of women in Turkey who disclose violence and seek support. This limitation also indicates a need for further research for a systematic examination of the country-specific reasons for the low rates of help-seeking among women experiencing marital violence. A second limitation is that the study included only women living in Istanbul at the time of the research. Istanbul is the largest, most developed city located in northwestern Turkey. Thus, this may limit the representativeness of the study as women living in different regions of the country (i.e., in less developed southeastern regions where state violence and armed conflict is high or in small cities or rural areas) may have quite different experiences.
Implications and conclusions

This study contributed to understanding the experiences and perspectives of low-income women living in urban Turkey regarding the gender- and class-based barriers to their safety and demonstrated how challenging their struggle with marital violence can be. First, considering the scarcity of scholarly research in Turkey that offers an examination of women’s experiences of escaping violence, the findings may be helpful in instigating more research and research-informed practices in the country. Second, the women’s narratives pointed to an immediate need for effective systemic responses to support women, such as requiring domestic violence training for police officers, increasing the availability of women’s shelters, improving the quality of support services, developing programs for economic empowerment, or providing housing support. Besides, the findings showed the necessity for psychosocial, educational programs or campaigns targeting family and community level changes, mainly to increase awareness regarding the complexities of women’s experiences of violence and promote supportive family engagement.

Furthermore, the narratives highlighted the necessity of incorporating feminist-informed strategies in psychological practices with women survivors, especially for developing strategies to meet the needs and goals of women in disadvantaged contexts. To achieve this, rather than solely focusing on intrapsychic dynamics of violence, trauma interventions should pay particular attention to women’s intersecting identities and socio-structural determinants of mental health. That is, psychological interventions need to properly acknowledge and assess multiple sociocultural and economic barriers in women’s lives that hinder their safety and well-being and assist women not only in their struggle with violence but also broader oppressive barriers.

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Supplemental material

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