ESCAPING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN TIME OF CONFLICT:
How do female refugees decide to flee?

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Abstract

Although research on refugees and asylum seekers exists within refugee studies and legal studies, scholars still know relatively little about the experiences of women belonging to these groups. This issue can benefit from incorporating a sociological perspective on migration and gender. This paper explores how women who experience domestic violence decide to flee their countries of origin in times of political conflict and persecution. How does flight from domestic violence interact with refugee migration? What forces trigger and perpetuate domestic violence related migration during times of conflict when refugee flows are ongoing? Through an analysis of twenty biographical interviews with female Chechen refugees in Poland, I argue that political conflict can be both a source of and an escape from domestic violence. I find that an ongoing conflict can strengthen the patriarchal patterns present in a community or lead to a degeneration of traditional gender hierarchies. While some Chechen women experienced more intensive patriarchal dynamics,, for many women, the refugee flow that grew out of political conflict facilitated a way out of abusive relationships via the possibility of international escape. In this research, the relationship between fleeing conflict and escaping abuse is observable at all three levels: the macro, the meso and the micro.

Introduction

The population of forcibly displaced people in the world has risen significantly since 2001: From 2014 to 2016 alone, it increased by 10% from 59.5 to 65.6 million. A large part of this group are international refugees (22.5m in 2016), almost half of whom are women and girls[1]. Both refugees and women are often described as having less agency—that is, that they lack the power to decide voluntarily to migrate.[2]

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[1] Based on the available data, 48 per cent of refugees were women in 2017. In Europe, female migrants outnumber male migrants (United Nations, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015)

[2] In this paper I explore the agency of female refugees fleeing domestic violence. Following Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins (2017), I define agency as not being simply about individual's power to decide and act for themselves, but as having a more relational character: 'To be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degrees of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree.'(Sewell as cited in Carling & Collins, 2017).

Presuming a lack of agency is one reason why scholars leave refugees out of the scope of migration theory: 'Forced migration is of course a topic of considerable interest and significance, but not with respect to individual decision-making' (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981). In this study I focus on how female refugees who have been victims of domestic violence make decisions about leaving their countries of origin during times of political conflict. I ask: How do survivors of domestic violence make the decision to leave the country? How does political conflict influence or facilitate their decision to flee? What is the role of macro, meso and micro forces in perpetuating of domestic violence-triggered migration?

Based on biographical interviews conducted with 20 female Chechen refugees and 12 refugee resettlement professionals in Poland between June and September 2018, I argue that political conflict can be both a source of and an escape from domestic violence. In the case of Chechen society, I find that an ongoing conflict can strengthen the patriarchal patterns present in a community or lead to degeneration of those customs. At the same time, for many Chechen women, political conflict created a way out of abusive relationships. This phenomenon was observed on multiple levels: 1) macro: political arrests of men changed social dynamics in a way that made it possible for women to escape their abusers; fleeing political persecution constituted a more convincing case to migration officials than escaping domestic violence, 2) meso: the flow of political refugees created institutions and networks that facilitated the refuge of domestic violence survivors, 3) micro: fear of political persecution was a more credible excuse for women's family members than fleeing an abusive partner.

This study contributes to several theoretical and empirical debates in gender and migration scholarship. First, I build upon existing theories of migration by incorporating both refugee and gender perspectives. Few social scientists have used the migration theory framework to discuss unique circumstances of refugee flows (Arar, 2016; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018), and to the extent they have, they have focused mostly on "political" migrants, a designation that frequently fails to account for gender and, therefore, does not incorporate individuals fleeing gender-based violence, including domestic-violence victims. Migration scholars have not considered patriarchal norms as a possible macro context for female refugee decision-

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making. When considering the context of forced migration (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018), social network theories neglect the perspective of those fleeing domestic abuse, even though such abuse may be enhanced in the context of war. Scholars have extensively discussed how previous economic migrants guide other economic migrants or people fleeing political persecution to the same places (Arar, 2016; Massey et al., 1993). I argue that in case of women fleeing domestic violence, conflict-related migration can have a similar significance. War can initiate migration, but social networks perpetuate it and facilitate groups that otherwise would have been constrained to migrate as well, such as domestic violence survivors. My research shows that in the face of patriarchal violence, women's networks can provide a source of gender-specific social capital that is kept secret from and exclusive of men. In addition, drawing on the new economics of labor migration framework (Massey et al., 1993) —which argues that migration decisions are made on the household level - I show how family dynamics influence the decision-making process of women escaping abuse. My study also challenges the concept of household as decision-maker Decisions usually made by a patriarchal head of household, are not always in the interest of the individual. By showing how political refugee migration can provide a mechanism and opportunity for women to flee abuse, I present a new – gendered – perspective on migration theories.

Findings regarding the agency of refugee women further contributes to the literature on the changing roles of gender in the context of migration. When gender relations, roles, and hierarchies are taken into account (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram, & Sales, 2000; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002), they are discussed in the context of the last stage of the migration process: the experiences of migrants in the receiving country. Researchers focus in particular on changing gender dynamics in a new society and integration patterns among men and women (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002; Menjívar & Agadjanian, 2007). Migration scholars identified two additional stages where gender roles, relations, and hierarchies influence the migration process and result in contrasting outcomes for women: the pre-migration stage and the transition across state boundaries (Boyd & Grieco, 2003: 3). These stages, however, are rarely of interest to scholars. I argue that understanding how gender roles and hierarchies

influence the pre-migration stage of female refugees is also crucial, as it may have implications for the other two stages as well as for their lives in exile and potential return. A sociological analysis of women's pre-migration experience can inform policy-making efforts in host countries that recognize the asylum claims of those fleeing domestic violence.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study is also relevant to debates about asylum and refugee law. Domestic violence is normatively and often legally considered an individual-level problem whereas political persecution is recognized as a structural or societal level issue. Indeed, the legal situation of those seeking asylum based on gender-related persecution is uncertain, given that gender was neglected in the dominant interpretation of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Unlike other aspects of difference including race, religion and nationality, gender is not listed as one of the Convention Grounds that can form the basis of a claim for protection under international law (Crawley, 2019). My study challenges these notions by demonstrating how closely migration triggered by domestic violence intertwines with politically motivated refuge.

Migration studies and gender

Although women and girls account for half of international migrants, research on migration has traditionally focused on men. Although feminist scholarship and Women's Studies programs, developed in the 1970s, resulted in increased interest in female migrants, many studies incorporated "gender" mostly by inserting the variable of sex into quantitative data collection, examining differences in gender roles present in the host society (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999). In the late 1990s, scholars argued against comparing men and women and their corresponding gender roles and in favor of a more flexible conceptualization of gender as relational and situational (Mahler & Pessar, 2006). Moreover, feminist scholars called for a greater focus on the gendered dimensions of migration and how it is influenced by different social, cultural and emotionally charged power relations. They saw the migrant not as a calculating autonomous entity, but rather as someone who is formed by intersecting processes and forces, playing an agentic role in those

processes (Silvey 2006 as cited in Carling & Collins, 2017). However, despite these efforts, still "most published work on immigration does not focus on women as women or on the gendered processes that underlie the experience of migration" (Espin & Dottolo, 2015). Feminist scholars argue that even when data about women and girls are presented, a gender analysis of the implications of these data tends to be absent (Espin & Dottolo, 2015). My research fills this void by demonstrating the processes that influence women's decision to flee to avoid domestic abuse. This analysis is inherently gendered as it focuses on women and girls that are targets of male abuse. It shows the mechanisms that may facilitate such violence, such as gendered socialization and war, but also its implications – gender-related migration.

Refugee studies have paid even less attention to gender. Although there is a significant amount of social science and legal research on refugees and asylum seekers, there is little research on the experiences of women belonging to these groups. It is usually male experiences of political persecution that serve as the norm within the asylum process (Kea & Roberts-Holmes, 2013). Some scholars alert that such bias can result in discrepancy in decision making in initial claims concerning female refugees, as well as in the appeals process (Reed, 2003; Kea & Roberts-Holmes, 2013). Female refugees do not always migrate for the same reasons that males do. My research focuses on reasons that predominantly concern women – experiencing domestic abuse. It is relevant to asylum and refugee law as it, in many countries, still struggles recognize the unique situation of those fleeing domestic violence.

Fleeing domestic violence

A United Nations report revealed that domestic violence is the most common killer of women around the world. Women killed by intimate partners or family members account for 58 per cent of all female homicide victims (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Domestic violence is an especially burning problem in Russia (including Russian Federation states). In 2017, according to Human Rights Watch, up to 36,000 Russian women and 26,000 children faced daily violence and abuse. In 91 percent of these cases the aggressor was a woman's husband (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Statistics provided by the United

Nations Population Fund show that 14,000 Russian women die annually from domestic violence-related injuries, which equals 38 women killed every day (Leidl, 2014). To make matters worse, in 2017, Russia's political system effectively condoned such violence by passing controversial amendments decriminalizing some forms of domestic violence[3]. As a result, domestic violence in the Russian Federation increased while reporting declined sharply (The Moscow Times, 2019).

Social researchers identify sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, as both a reason why female refugees decide to leave countries of origin, and a reality they face along the refugee and migration route (FRA, 2016). However, not all women who experience domestic violence may be subject to international refugee protection. Only those who meet the definition of a "refugee" can make a valid claim for asylum[4]. Gender, unlike other aspects of difference including race, religion and nationality, is not listed as one of the Convention Grounds that can form the basis of a claim for protection under international law.

What is more, after recent political shifts in the US and Europe (e.g. in Poland), the number of asylums granted on this basis has decreased (Niżyńska, 2018; Crawley 2018). In June 2018, former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions ruled that "aliens who fear domestic violence in their home countries do not qualify for asylum based on those grounds" (Smith, 2018). Similarly, Polish migration officials are reportedly more likely than before to deny asylum to domestic abuse victims, arguing that "in Poland husbands also beat their wives" (Niżyńska, 2018). For that reason, I argue that many women fleeing domestic violence can *only* do so in the context of a larger political conflict that has established channels of refugee migration. In

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[3] According to the new law, violence against a spouse or children that results in bruising or bleeding but not broken bones is punishable by 15 days in prison or a fine of 30,000 roubles ($464) if they do not happen more than once a year. Previously, these offences carried a maximum jail sentence of two years (Human Rights Watch, 2017).
[4] The definition coined in 1951 in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that a refugee is a person "…owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (FitzGerald & Arar, 2017)

other words, it is precisely the political conflict that both escalates the violence triggering the migration, and that creates the mechanisms to actually leave.

Refugee studies & migration decision-making

Typical sociological definitions of refugees are organized around a set of related dichotomies that distinguish refugees from "migrants" (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). Commonly, refugees are theorized to have less agency than migrants because their movement is described as involuntary, forced or reactive (Richmond, 1988). Recent scholarship has attempted to combine both fields by analyzing refugee trajectories through the lens of migration theories (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Haug, 2008; Hear, Bakewell, & Long, 2017). My study follows in these footsteps by applying migration theories to female refugees' decision-making process in several ways: 1) the macro context of decision-making framework, 2) the social networks and institutional theories (meso), and, 3) the new economics of labor migration framework (micro). I will do this in the context of survivors of domestic violence from Chechnya now living in Poland.

Proponents of the **macro context of decision-making framework** believe that individuals and households are embedded within broader social systems that have their own organization and values. Social and economic structures are transformed through powerful macro-level forces that remain beyond the control of any particular family or community. Within this framework, an individual's position within social structures determines the context in which migration decisions are made (Massey et al., 1993). Scholars have discussed forces such as natural disasters, war and economic collapse as examples of these macro-level forces. In this paper I add a new example of the macro-level force that can shape the decision to migrate – patriarchy, specifically as it is activated amid conflict. Thus, I argue that Chechen female refugees' decision-making processes were influenced by two macro-level forces: an ongoing conflict between Chechnya and Russia and a strong patriarchal culture that is conducive to gender-based and domestic violence against women.

For context, escalation of the conflict, which was followed by the biggest influx of Chechen refugees to neighboring Russian republics and other countries, took place during two Chechen wars with Russia (1994-1996 and 1999-2003). In 2003, Chechnya became part of the Russian Federation, and the government was taken over by pro-Russian president Ahmat Kadyrov, and then by Ramzan Kadyrov, who, as of 2019, continues to rule. Under his regime, large numbers of Chechens have fled as refugees (Borkiewicz et al. 2017). Layton (2014) estimates that 25% of the Chechen population has left their homeland. Since 2000, Chechens have constituted the largest number among asylum-seekers in Poland. It is difficult to determine exactly how many Chechens are currently living in Poland. According to estimates, it is about 20,000 people (Borkiewicz et al. 2017).

In addition to ongoing political persecution, Chechen women live within a highly patriarchal culture. In the Northern Caucasus culture, women occupy a servile position in the family hierarchy of the family. From childhood, they are brought up in obedience to the elders, especially men who decide about all important matters, including women's rights to education, work and spousal choice (Klaus, 2014). Of the twenty participants in my study, nine were forced into marriage by their families before they turned 18 years old and another 5 were kidnapped by their future husbands. The youngest was 14 years old at the time of marriage. However, those women do not blame their parents who forced them into marriage at a very early age; they see it as part of their culture and tradition. After marriage, women are under the tutelage of the husband's family, who gains the right to decide their future. Such dependence may allow psychological and physical abuse within the household. Almost all of my interviewees were told by their husband's family to stop their education right after getting married. Some of them were not allowed to leave the house without their husband's permission. The vast majority experienced both psychological and physical abuse by their husbands or family members.

At the macro-level, I argue that war can strengthen patriarchal patterns and lead to increase in domestic violence. Although there are no official statistics, various sources indicate that bride-kidnapping, child marriages and domestic violence have been on the rise since the conflict between Russia and Chechnya

began (Klaus, 2014; Umarova, 2010; Werner et al., 2018). The majority of my interviewees stated that their husbands became more aggressive after experiencing political persecution, such as torture. Scholars argue that state-sponsored violence, such as civil conflicts and wars, is one of the crucial determinants of women's vulnerability and safety, including the increase of domestic violence (Walker, 1999). Tanya Lokshina, a researcher with Human Rights Watch, explains that another reason behind increase in bride-kidnapping, child marriages and domestic violence is that the risk of prosecution during conflicts is very low (Umarova, 2010). Police resources are being directed elsewhere and protecting domestic violence victims is being pushed to the bottom of officials' priority list. Moreover, it may happen that perpetrators work for the regime and, therefore, are untouchable for local law enforcement.

On the micro level, this study flies in the face of the assumptions of **the new economics of labor migration framework**, which assumes that migration decisions are made by larger units of interrelated people, typically families, households or entire communities (Massey et al., 1993). For refugees, of course, it is violence rather than insufficiency in a household economic situation, that constitutes the major risk that needs to be managed (Fitzgerald and Arar 2018). However, as Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) notes, the absence of gender in the new economics of labor migration framework that presents the household as "a unified collectivity" and does not discuss intergenerational and cross-gender conflicting interests (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Following Hondagneu-Sotelo, I challenge the new economics of labor migration framework by showing how family dynamics may negatively influence the victim's decision-making process to escape her abuser. Moreover, I argue that in patriarchal societies, in the time of an on-going political conflict, fleeing political persecution is seen as a more "acceptable" reason than escaping domestic abuse for some family members. Therefore, in order for women to receive any help or at least approval of their plan, are forced to conceal this motive.

Once women experienced violence and decide to flee, they draw on social networks and institutions created in the context of conflict-related forced migration. **Social networks and institutional theory** emphasize the importance of interpersonal ties and institutions that increase the likelihood of international migration

by lowering the costs and risks of movement and integration (Massey et al., 1993). Once international migration begins, social networks develop, along with private and black-market institutions and voluntary organizations. For example, for-profit groups and private entrepreneurs provide various services to migrants in exchange for fees set on the black market: smuggling across borders; transport; fake documents and visas. Humanitarian organizations help migrants by providing counseling, social services, shelter, and legal advice (Massey et al., 1993).

Social networks and institutions play an important role in the context of refugee migration, as previous economic migrants often guide people fleeing political persecution to the same places (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). I apply a similar logic to the case of women fleeing domestic violence: that is, war may have initiated migration flows, but social networks perpetuate it and allow groups that otherwise may have been constrained to migrate as well, such as domestic violence survivors.

Feminist scholars have shown that research on social networks often omits the gender dimension, implying "that married women automatically benefit from the resources and expertise located in their husbands' social network" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 6). Few studies acknowledge that women may actually be excluded (Livingston 2006) or even hurt by their husbands' ties. For example, social networks, may also play *against* those refugees who try to hide their identity in order to avoid further violence, a practice Arar (2016) refers to as "strategic anonymity." She shows how displacement, settlement and integration of political migrants can be influenced by an imbalance of the power to impose violence within a social network. In Arar's case, the imbalance exists between Iraqi refugees who fled their home country and the militia members that their networks contain (Arar, 2016). I incorporate Arar's concept to the context of female Chechen migration by arguing that a similar imbalance can be observed between women fleeing domestic violence and their perpetrators. That is, tight and extensive Chechen networks make it easier for abusive husbands and relatives to track and threaten a 'disobedient' wife, sister or daughter. To prevent that, some women are forced to avoid the familial networks and change their identity during the journey

and settlement period. Through this research I show how female friends and family members can be both purveyors of information and secret-keepers for women experiencing domestic abuse.

In summary, I expand theories of migration to account for women fleeing gender-based violence in times of political conflict. I build on macro decision-making theory by presenting patriarchy as a new macro context that can force women to flee their country. I then build on the new economics of labor migration framework (micro-level theory) by showing how women who experience domestic abuse make their decision to escape alone or with the support of only the most trusted female relatives. Finally, I expand social networks and institutional theories on the meso level by showing how political migrants and institutions that emerged due to politically triggered migration can guide those fleeing domestic violence. I also show how women can create exclusively female networks, in a patriarchal society, in order to flee. Taken together, my analyses show that when describing decision-making process of women fleeing domestic violence, we cannot look solely at one level. Conflict-related micro, meso and macro forces interact and influence each other: on the one hand, strengthening an abusive trap, and on the other hand, opening a door to escape.

Method and data

I used biographical interviews, semi-structured interviews and the abductive approach[5] (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009) to understand the decision-making processes of female Chechen refugees that leads them to flee their home-country. I collected data in Poland between June and September 2018. In the first stage of the research, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with professionals working with female refugees, including human rights lawyers, psychologist, NGO workers, volunteers and government

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[5] "In the context of research, abduction refers to an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence. A researcher is led away from old to new theoretical insights" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012: 170).

employees. In the second and main stage of the study, I conducted 20 biographical interviews with female refugees from North Caucasus who were living in Warsaw and Gdańsk, Poland.

After receiving ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of California–Davis, I recruited participants through several channels: 1) attending events organized by or for refugee/migrant groups in Warsaw and in Gdansk, 2) talking to NGO employees that work with refugees, and 3) contacting refugee centers in a few cities and towns in Poland. After recruiting several participants, I used snowball sampling method to recruit additional participants. I attended gatherings organized by and for refugees that allowed me to connect with potential participants. Due to my previous employment and volunteer work, I had already established contacts in relevant non-governmental organizations working with refugees. Conducting semi-structured interviews with NGO workers and refugee center employees helped me gain background knowledge about the group in which I was interested, including the complexity of their legal situation, the procedures they went through, and the migration regulations and reality in Poland. For example, a meeting with a psychologist who had worked with female refugees helped me prepare to manage my reactions while listening to refugees' narrative of long-lasting trauma and abuse. I conducted all interviews in-person and audio-recorded them. Interviews with professionals were conducted in Polish, and interviews with refugees were conducted in either Polish (9 narratives) or in Russian (11 narratives), the common language among Chechens. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. Before each interview, I provided a summary of the research project and obtained informed consent.

The group of 20 refugees included 18 Chechen women, one Tajik woman, and another from Kyrgyzstan. In this paper, I will refer to all women from the North Caucasus as Chechens.[6] The youngest participant

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[6] This is, of course, a simplification, but it seems acceptable in the context of domestic violence against women. The cultures of the above-mentioned groups - despite many common elements - obviously differ among themselves. However, the family model and the position of women in the social hierarchy is very similar in all groups. Therefore, it can be assumed that the threat of discrimination and domestic violence, ascribed to their local cultural practices, affects Chechen women in a similar way as women from Kirgizstan or Tajikistan. The whole region has also seen intermittent military conflict over the last twenty years.

was 19 years old, the oldest one was 75. The average length of stay in Poland was 7 years ranging from around 7 months to 20 years.

For the study I chose the narrative interview technique developed by German sociologist Fritz Schütze (2007), which consists of asking the interviewee about the course of their biography. A narrative interview technique is useful because it helps to create an interactive atmosphere between the interviewer and the participant. It also partially mitigates the asymmetrical relationship that arises when an interview is conducted with a previously prepared list of questions (Urbańska, 2015). The open structure of interviews allowed interviewees to more comfortably address difficult topics. A narrative interview consists of two parts. The first, main part of the interview is a story spontaneously told by the narrator. In this part, the researcher, apart from the general explanation of the purpose of the research and the principles of interviewing, does not intervene in the story of the subject. All the conversations were opened with the same question: "Could you tell me the story of your life? You may start from the moment you find convenient." This start made it possible to obtain the most uninhibited narration. The second, additional part of the interview begins when the interviewee ends the narrative. The researcher then asks an initial series of questions concerning the chronological order of events and unclear parts of the interview. Subsequently, the researcher asks for comments and opinions related to the reported events as well as other topics of interest. In this part of the interview, the narrator becomes a "theoretician of his own life" (Schütze, 2007).

Along with a trained research assistant, I transcribed the interviews, proceeded by abductive analysis. In the beginning, I read transcripts in their entirety to a gain general understanding of female refugees' experiences. Using themes that emerged from information gathered during earlier stages of the research and the readings, I arrived at broad codes[7]. I then applied them to the data, adding more specific open codes in the process. It allowed me to identify analytical patterns and relationships between the patterns within

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[7] (see Appendix A)

and across interviews. To preserve confidentiality, I changed the names of people and places in all the accounts.

As a Polish female researcher from an American institution with a rich network among Polish NGOs, my positionality significantly affected my access to female Chechen refugees and my data analysis. My knowledge of the Polish and Russian languages provided me technical skills to conduct interviews and encouraged some of the participants to interact with me during the events I attended. Having experience collaborating with NGOs that worked with refugees and having family members and friends engaged in such work made it easier for me to establish contacts with professionals and with refugees themselves. On the one hand, being associated with those organizations and their employees allowed me to build trust with the participants. On the other hand, my position created a potential risk of refugees feeling obligated to participate in the study. To avoid situations where women would feel obliged to talk to me in order to continue receiving help, I ensured them of the voluntariness of the participation and lack of connection between the research and the organization's help on multiple stages of the study. Moreover, when possible, before conducting an interview I organized an initial meeting during which I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the study and asked a potential participant to take their time in making the decision regarding their participation in the study. After the meeting I waited several days before determining consent.

Findings

The vast majority (17 out of 20) reported experiencing the following forms of gender-based and domestic violence in their home countries: marriage-related harm (child-marriages, bride-kidnapping), violence within the family or community, domestic slavery, forced abortion, sexual violence, abuse, and rape. A few participants in addition experienced conflict-related persecution, including arrest and torture. The following analysis illustrates how survivors of domestic violence make the decision to leave their country and how this decision is facilitated and supported by the conflict-related circumstances on all three levels: political conflict (macro), social networks and institutions (meso), and significant others (micro). To better illustrate

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how all the levels interact, I present the stories of women who fled their country because of domestic violence. While each narrative focuses on one level (macro or micro), all migration theories can be identified within each story: macro context theory, social networks and institutions and the new economics of labor migration framework.

Macro context

To understand how a woman who experiences gender-based violence decides to leave the home country, it is crucial to first understand her position within existing social structures. Drawing on the macro context of decision-making framework, I argue that culturally conditioned, gender-based violence and persecution against women from North Caucasus and the on-going conflict between Chechen nation and Russia constitute two macro-level forces that intersect and influence women's decision-making process when fleeing their country.

Kariina's story and cited examples show how patriarchal customs trap women in situations of domestic abuse and how an on-going political conflict intensifies the abuse. At the same time, women's experiences show how political turmoil can create a way out from an abusive relationship.

Kariina

"I was born in the 70's in a wonderful family. My parents were very good people. Both my father and my mother. When I was 15, they married me. This is what happens in our culture," Kariina started. Her future husband, ten years her senior, was her father's business partner. He saw her for the first time when she was playing in the courtyard two years earlier. Since then, "for two years straight he had been coming to see if I had grown up." When Kariina turned 15, he arrived at her parents' house with a group of elderly relatives to ask for her hand. Although initially reluctant, Kariina's parents finally agreed to their teenage daughter's marriage:

At first, [my parents] did not want to agree, they said I was still too young. Then the elders of the family started coming, they had been coming for a long time. And at that time in Chechnya it was very dangerous. War began, young people disappeared without a word, girls were kidnapped and raped, boys died. My parents decided it was safer for me to get married. So, they agreed.

Soon after the wedding, the abuse started and lasted for the next 20 years. The description of horrific violence covers seven out of thirteen pages of Kariina's interview transcript. During these twenty years, Kariina gave birth to four children and twice moved to another country to escape the wars. She also suffered multiple bone fractures, cut wounds, burns and constant psychological and sexual violence from her husband. As a result of the abuse, her spine was broken twice. Over 20 years she reported her husband to the police three times. Every time she was turned away. "It is a family matter; we do not interfere in family matters" she recalled the police telling her. Twice she asked for help from a local clergyman, who explained to her that she should not "break the family." Four times she escaped to her parents' home. Every time her parents let her stay for a couple of months, after which she had to go back:

Every time I ran away to my parents, he [husband] sent people [elders from the family] to my parents with gifts. The Imam also came. They came and talked, and we [Chechens] need to listen to the elders, we cannot say no to them. They promised that he would not beat me anymore, they explained that children must be brought up with their mother and father. He promised he would be better. I had to go back. And it all started again.

A turning point for Kariina was an appearance of a "political problem" which she decided to use as her way out of the multilayered trap:

His [husband's] cousin was engaged in some political issues and they [Kadyrov's supporters] came to our house. The fight started, someone pushed me, I fell. Many people were taken away, among them my husband. I knew this was my chance. I called a friend and asked if I could stay with her for a few days, she said yes. My oldest son drove me there. I took my daughter and my

youngest son. Oldest children I sent to my parents. I did not have anything, no clothes, no food,

because I had to leave very quickly, but my friend gave me everything I needed. My sister, who

lived in France, sent me money. My friend bought me a ticket, put me on the train and I came to

Poland. He [husband] did not know that I was leaving.

Kariina's decision to leave the country was fast, but with the support of her female network she was able

to escape, under the guise of the political conflict. When asked why she did not escape earlier, she explained

that she was afraid of her husband finding out about it and hurting her or someone from her family. Knowing

that he was temporarily in jail made her feel safer. Kariina also believed that her husband's arrest could

give her a more convincing escape motive when she faced border control agents. She had heard stories of

people not being let through and having to wait at the border for a few months. She decided to perform

"strategic telling the story":

I told about this political problem [at the border] because it happened after all. But I also talked

about what I experienced at home. For me, what happened at home was more important. I told him

[the border official] that my husband was abusing me. I've talked about both things. And they let

me through during my first attempt. I could not believe it. I was so happy.

After she arrived in Poland, she got a message from her family that her husband was released. After

spending almost one year in Poland, she is still waiting to be granted refugee status. Her application was

denied twice with an explanation that Russia is big enough to escape from an abusive husband.

Kariina's narrative shows how the two macro contexts influence the decision-making process to leave the

country from the perspective of women suffering domestic abuse. An extremely patriarchal culture traps

them in abusive relationships, not letting them out, even when they actively seek help from local

institutions, such as police, religious centers, or from family members. This pattern is clear in Kariina's

narrative at least twice: First, when she states that both her parents were wonderful people, but were forced

to marry her young and against her will because of existing customs, and second, when she describes how one cannot disagree with family elders.

Multiple narratives from other women showed that war and political persecutions strengthen the abusive trap. In some cases, husbands became more violent as a result of torture they experienced in war (Maliika, Marjam, Liiza). In other cases, family members suffered torture and had to flee, leaving their suffering daughter behind (Hava). Police officers do not react, not wanting to interfere in "family issues", and because of the ongoing conflict, have "more important problems to worry about" (Maliika, Hava, Aina). The war also creates the need for families to force their teenage daughters into unwanted marriages "for their own protection" (Kariina, Maaret). This is how sixty year old Maaret, who was forced into marriage at the age of 15, explained the reasoning behind agreeing to her sixteen-year-old daughter's marriage:

> *M: She [the daughter] just finished the 10th grade, she was sixteen and wanted to become a doctor.*
> *But Dudayev came and the whole war started (…). My parents, my relatives said, "during the war,*
> *when they see a pretty girl, they pull her out and take her away.." And my daughter, she was very*
> *pretty. And everybody told me that they would steal her from me, those bandits and others, and it*
> *was better to marry her, so her husband could protect her.*

> *R: And you agreed?*

> *M: She did not want to go and she cried, and I did not want her to go, and I cried. But the elders*
> *in our family, they shouted at me and said: "Give her away, now is the time, lots of bandits and*
> *terrorists. If anything happens to her, it will be your fault." So I gave up.*

Similar motives guided Hava's parents when making a decision to marry their teenage daughter to a man 10 years her senior. A few months earlier, their youngest son had been murdered and the father severely tortured by political opponents. Worried about their daughter's safety, they decided to find her a husband

who would protect her. They had not foreseen that the man who was supposed to be her guardian would become her greatest torturer.

At the same time, political conflict made it possible for some women to escape their abusers. Similar to Kariina's case, husbands' arrests opened the door to flight for Maliika and Eliina. Moreover, all three of these women managed to cross the border into Poland thanks to the history of their families' political persecution. Politically motivated escape was more convincing for border and immigration officials than being a domestic violence survivor.

Social networks and Institutions (meso level)

The role of the political conflict was also significant on the meso level of the decision-making process. Previous war-initiated migration had created social networks and institutions that made it easier for domestic violence victims to organize their escape. In Kheeda's case, she had a childhood friend who fled to Poland years earlier because of political persecution. This friend helped Kheeda escape her abusive husband and relatives who had sentenced her to an "honor killing":

> *When all this happened to me, I did not know what to do, I just had to run away. I had an old friend, who had been here in Poland for a long time. We wrote to each other on Odnoklasniki (Russian social media). And when I wrote to her that I had to go somewhere right away, that I could not return home, she suggested that I come here. She explained to me how to do it, where to go first, how to get a passport. I could not do it without her.*

Social networks played an important role also at the earlier, decision-making stage. In almost all cases, support to migrate came from other women in migrants' networks, most often from those who moved abroad years earlier. In all cases, female friends knew that women were seeking to flee from domestic violence. Often, they too had a history of experiencing domestic violence. Victims of domestic abuse typically do not have their own money, being financially dependent on their abusers. While planning their

journey, interviewees frequently reached out to their female relatives and close friends for financial help. Friends and relatives also provided assistance by offering a place to stay on the journey and gathering necessary accessories (clothes, cosmetics, diapers for babies):

> *I went by train, through Moscow. I had an old classmate there, she picked me from the station. I stayed with her for a couple days. She suggested that I stayed in Moscow with her. But I did not want to, I did not feel safe. When I was leaving, she gave me a whole layette: clothes, deodorant, everything was there! (Kheeda)*

In some cases, female social networks played an additional important role. They connected women who suffered domestic abuse and were considering fleeing with each other. For Liiza, it was her female cousin, who after hearing about her plan to escape, decided to join her:

> *The cousin who went with me also ran away from her husband. She wanted to kill herself, he beat her so much, he was so jealous. When she found out that I wanted to run, she said she wanted to join me (…). She quickly organized her escape and came along with me and my children (Liiza).*

In cases where women did not know anyone who fled in the same direction personally, already established networks "carried them with the flow."

> *When I was already on the train, they [other migrants/refugees] realized that I had no money nor food, that I was leaving in a hurry. And on this train, they gathered a lot of food for me and for the children. That is how we survived two weeks on the road (Liiza).*

> *When I came to Brest [Belarus-Poland border crossing] there were so many people there… I apparently came during a time when there was a very large influx of Chechens. And with them I would try to cross the border multiple times. I did not know anything myself, so I just followed them (Kheeda).*

Parallel to these social networks, years of political refugee flows from Chechnya to Europe has given rise to a range of private, for-profit institutions and voluntary humanitarian organizations whose goal has been to lower the costs and risks of migration. Almost all of the interviewees discussed getting their travel documents from fake-passport providers that have served those fleeing political persecution. In most cases, the providers that helped participants in my study to get all the documents, were also female. They did not ask questions about the motives of women's escape. Some interviewees described them as being more secretive and trustworthy than men when it came to keeping secrets about escapes' motives.

> *I did not know even where to go [to get passports]. My [female] friend told me that one woman did it in our area, and she came to my place, she took pictures of all of us at home. All children were in the same shirt in the picture, because this shirt looked nice (laughs). She did not ask any questions; she knew exactly what she was doing. Two weeks later I had all the passports (Lulii).*

As the political migration progressed, other informal institutions appeared and knowledge about them quickly spread within tight Chechen networks. My interviewees learned whom and how much they should bribe to get through subsequent stages of the journey, how to find private rooms for rent at the border crossing between Belarus and Poland,[8] and what was a reasonable price to pay. For those who did not know where to go once they crossed the Belarussian-Polish border, taxi drivers were waiting, eager to offer their services:

> *When we [Lulii and her children] came to Poland, they kept us in Terespol [border crossing] until 11pm, in one small room. There were 30 people there (...). After 11pm they finally let us in and told us that we could go wherever we wanted, but we did not know where to go. But taxi drivers were waiting there, who knew where to go. Those taxi drivers immediately started yelling at us: "to Dębak, to Dębak!" [refugee center]. They already knew what "Dębak" meant. They explained to us in poorly spoken Russian that anyone who passes the border goes to Dębak, or to France, or to*

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[8] Very often migrants had to wait multiple days or even weeks to be let through the border.

Austria, just then you have to pay more money. They said they would take us there. I said that I just want to get to Dębak (Lulii).

Not all women, however, could depend on their social networks while planning and pursuing the escape. For Hava, reliance on strong ties was associated with danger. Even after moving to a neighboring republic in the Russian Federation, she continued receiving death threats from her husband's relatives. Her brother in-law was able to track her thanks to the help from extended family members, who recognized her in a local immigration office. She was forced to perform 'strategic anonymity' (Arar, 2016), by using a fake name and avoiding places where she thought her husband's relatives could find her. Weak ties, formed through political migrant groups and institutions created during the process of seeking political refuge, helped her to successfully escape. One day, while waiting in line at a local office, Hava heard about the possibility of going to Poland – "It is much easier, you take a special train, there is only one layover" – people told her. Assured that she would get help from other passengers, who most likely were also refugees and migrants fleeing to Poland, she decided to get on the train the next day.

Hava is not the only one who purposefully avoided using social networks in Chechnya and neighboring Russian Federations out of fear that it would help their perpetrators to find them. Twenty-four-year-old Heda, who was forced into marriage 10 years earlier and was afraid of her family's reaction to the life she started after leaving her abusive husband, decided to take on a fake nationality, not to be "judged and oppressed" by her compatriots:

- Nobody here knows that I'm a from Chechnya, because I do not tell anyone. I say that I'm from X [a different Russian Federation].

- Why?

- Because I do not look like them. I wear trousers, I smoke, I am different. It does not mean that I want to be like Poles, no. I just want to be allowed to be the kind of person I want to be. I do not

want to walk in those scarves, be locked up (sobbing). This is a free country, here you can walk as you like. And that is why I am not saying that I am from Chechnya (...). Because if someone sees that Chechen woman is smoking, then I am sorry for the expression, they will immediately say that she is a whore or something (...). I do not like that, which is why I say that I am from X.

Avoiding social networks can be especially hard in North Caucasus nations, where ties between family and clan members are very strong and cultural belonging highly praised.

The (new economics of) labor migration framework (micro level)

Despite the fact that the new economics framework does not directly translate into the experience of women fleeing domestic abuse, it serves as a reference point in the analysis. Collected interviews show an inadequacy in the assumption that migration decisions are made by whole families, households or communities as a way to maximize the family's prospects. In reality, those experiencing domestic violence often make the decision to flee alone or in consultation only with the most trusted female relatives. As with social networks, at the family level, women served both as secret keepers and supporters of their female relatives' plans to flee abuse.

At the same time, all interviewees were forced to navigate ambiguous, sometimes threatening family dynamics in order to escape. Such process is visible in Maliika's biography, which featured multiple escape attempts from gender-based and domestic violence compounded by troubling family dynamics. Her relatives decided whether they were willing to take her back home after she fled an abusive husband and sentenced her to an "honor killing" after one of the escapes. Eventually, they approved her escape from the country only after she presents, what they deemed to be, a valid motive.

Maliika

Maliika was born into a large family – she had eight siblings. At age sixteen she was kidnapped by a stranger 11 years her senior to become his wife. Two strangers pushed her into the car on her way to school and drove her to an unknown house, when she was locked with her "future husband":

> We have such [custom] law: if a girl stays with a boy in the same room for the night, if he touches her, it's over, she has to [marry him] (...). They locked us in the room. He sat down and said, 'I will not touch you. Just say 'yes'. If you say 'yes', I will not do anything to you.' And I knew that if he touches me, it's over. So I said 'Yes' Then, in the morning, everyone came back, they [elderly] said 'she agreed.' And the people from my family came (...) and they asked if I agreed. I said 'No, never. But I am your child, please don't leave me'(...). And they took me home.

After returning home, Maliika was considered "cursed" by her own family. The elders of the family gathered together and decided that she should be returned to her kidnapper. To avoid that, Maliika ran to a nearby market and asked a local meat vendor if he wanted to marry her. That is how she explained her actions: "I knew him a little bit. He showed interest in me before and I thought it would be better this way. He was pretty and only nineteen." The family did not accept her decision and forbid her to ever come home again.

The first three years after the wedding "passed normally" and the war began. Maliika is silent about her experiences from this period. All she says is: "That is when I started to hate the men." In 2000 the first phase of the war was over and the persecution started. Her brother-in-law was murdered, and her husband severely tortured. When he returned home "he was a different man." Extensive physical abuse began. Maliika unsuccessfully sought help from the local *muchtijat* (religious center) and the police. After one particularly horrific incident, she decided to contact her family and got permission from her mother to return home. By that time, she was 30 years old, weighed 90 pounds and had lost most of her hair and teeth. Although the women from the family accepted her and wanted to take care of her, the elderly (men) did not

agree. The night of her return, she was approached by her younger brother who was appointed to carry out an "honor killing" on her. He was unable to kill his sister who was a mother of three children and told her to run away. Maliika knew that she did not have a choice. She had already lost a few of her female relatives to "honor killings", so she decided to take the children and return to her abusive husband.

> *We have this [custom] law that if a girl makes one step left or one step right, if she does not do exactly what they [the elders] want, she gets killed (…). My brother killed, uncle killed. And they were not found guilty of anything. They just... they just killed them. One day someone found the grave. There were twelve girls buried there, our relatives, who were fifteen or sixteen. But no one went to prison for it. I was supposed to lie in this grave.*

Maliika stayed with her husband for another year. The abuse became even more severe, as the husband punished her for the attempt to escape. As a result of rape, she became pregnant with her fourth child.

Maliika's first thought about leaving the country appeared when she visited her cousin Nuura in a hospital. Nuura was around Maliika's age and was dying of AIDS. Similar to Maliika, she had experienced severe domestic abuse for over 15 years. When diagnosed with AIDS, passed to her by her husband, she was excluded from the family. It was Nuura's words that convinced Maliika to flee:

> *I was sitting by her bed and she told me: 'I never wore any makeup, I never wore a nice dress, I did not want to tease anyone. But still I was punished. I was not happy; I have never been happy' (…). She looked at me and said 'Run! What are you waiting for? Go. Go wherever you want. Save yourself, for me.' At that moment, I started thinking of leaving.*

When asked why she had not thought about fleeing earlier, Maliika explained that she had always been "a patriot" and considered leaving the country, especially in the time of conflict, as an act of betrayal. From this moment, Maliika started planning her and her children's escape. Being seven months pregnant she knew "it was too late for an abortion." She decided to wait for the baby and leave soon after it was born.

She had around 2 months to get ready. Knowing that if her family found out, she could be killed, she organized everything herself with the help of a female cousin that fled Chechnya during the previous war. Maliika's cousin was able to tell her where she could find a local fake-passport provider and how much money she needed for potential bribes on her way. For a month she secretly put away extra food for her and her children's journey. When everything was ready and she had enough money, she decided to tell her family. As she explained, she did not want to be all alone again:

> *When everything was ready, despite everything, I decided to tell my family: my parents and brothers. I sat them down and said: "I'm leaving." That's when objections started. They were furious that I wanted to leave alone with the children. So, very quickly I added, "I'm going with my husband. They want to arrest him again, that's why I have to ...." I got scared, that's why I said that I was going with my husband, even though it wasn't true. But thanks to that, they did not try to stop me. The next day I left.*

Maliika and her children have been in Poland for a bit over a year. They are still waiting to be granted refugee status.

As Maliika's narrative shows, in a situation of culturally conditioned gender-based violence, the closest family or clan often opposed the idea of her fleeing. As a result, some women were forced to use culturally-accepted excuses to convince their closest ones of their plan. It was similarly easier to convince border officials of the necessity to flee because of political persecution rather than domestic abuse.

Another important component in most women's risk-benefit equation when it comes to fleeing domestic abuse was the danger of losing their children. In some parts of the North Caucasus, a customary law states that the father has an exclusive right to keep the children after parents' separation. Deshi, who stayed with her abusive husband for over 25 years, explained that the fear of losing her children was the main reason she did not decide to leave earlier. To avoid such situations, some women chose to flee the country alongside their abusive husbands, as political refugees, and divorce them once settled abroad with legal help from

NGOs. This was of the case for Mirjam, who, after hearing about such a possibility from a friend living in Poland, decided to flee Chechnya along with her violent husband. Because of severe political persecution they both experienced, both were granted political asylum. After arriving in Europe, Mirjam went straight to the organization she had heard about and started a divorce procedure. Today, after the divorce, Mirjam lives in a social housing with her two youngest children.

Conclusion

This research shows how refugee migration allows women to exert agency over oppressive and violent situations. Through an analysis of 20 biographical interviewees with female Chechen refugees, I demonstrate how macro, meso and micro forces influence domestic violence survivors' decision-making process to flee their country of origin. On the macro level, the findings reveal how an ongoing political conflict in conjunction with patriarchal culture can significantly limit women's agency and cause the growth of domestic abuse from the hands of tortured husbands. Finally, political conflict can deprive women from support of arrested or killed family members. At the same time, political turmoil can create a crack in a patriarchal trap, allowing a domestic-violence victim to escape. Such a 'crack' may take various forms: the political arrest of an abusive husband or providing a more externally validated reason for refuge, especially in this case political persecution. On a micro level, political conflict provides women experiencing domestic violence with a more culturally-validated reason for escape. Family members who previously opposed the thought of their relative leaving an abusive husband, frequently changed their attitude when presented with the idea of politically-motivated refuge.

A similar double impact on women's decision-making process was observed on meso level. With the use of social networks and institutional theories I show how previous political migrants and those who aid them—especially other women—can guide women fleeing domestic violence to the same places. Female networks play a crucial role not only as purveyors of information but also secret-keepers. Furthermore, established institutions - fake-passport providers, migrant-dedicated trains, taxi drivers, local landlords and

non-governmental organizations - make it easier for domestic abuse survivors to organize and carry out their escape.   At the same time, some women are forced to perform 'strategic anonymity' (Arar, 2016) by staying away from their own familial networks or even changing their identity in order to avoid being tracked by their perpetrators.

This research expands theories of migration on multiple levels. It contributes to macro decision-making theory by showing how patriarchy can constitute a macro context that forces women to flee their country. It then provides a critique of applicability of the new economics of labor migration framework to women's decision making by showing how women who experience domestic abuse make their decision to escape alone or with the support of only most trusted female relatives. Finally, it expands social networks and institutional theories by showing how political migrants and institutions that emerged during political migration can guide those fleeing domestic violence. The findings also illustrate how, in a patriarchal society, women can create exclusively female networks, in order to flee their abusive partners.

When making a claim for asylum for domestic violence victims, lawyers must not only prove that the persecution was based on the asylum seekers' gender but also show that the country of origin systematically lacked the resources or willingness to protect them from the abuser. With the use of gathered data and migration theories I show how, during a political turmoil, macro, meso and micro forces create such harmful circumstances. Moreover, the above findings demonstrate that the tendency of refugee status decision-makers to see domestic violence as a private matter likely does not paint a full picture. Domestic violence occurs as a result of patriarchal structures at multiple levels, not because of conflict between individuals.

My findings are likely to raise questions about the representativeness of the research. There is no guarantee that the conclusions drawn from the study of twenty refugees, will hold in relation to others. However, it is important to note, that the participants of the study do not operate in a social vacuum. They face similar problems and experiences to women fleeing domestic violence in other places of the world. A detailed

analysis of experiences of this specific group can help to better understand not only the reality that such women struggle with every day, but also about different mechanisms and forces that affect them.

Moreover, given growing numbers of refugees and migrants around the world and rapid political changes that shape immigration policies, additional research is needed to highlight the experiences of other invisible groups. Future research could examine, for example, struggles of members of LGBTQ community who decide to flee the country because of persecution based on their sexual orientation. Such persecution is reportedly increasingly common in Russia and Russian Federations. In January 2019, a leading activist with the Russian LGBT Network, Igor Kochetkov, stated that the organization had received credible reports about a new wave of LGBT round-ups by authorities in Chechnya. He issued a complaint that specified at least 14 people being unlawfully held and tortured by police in Grozny, Chechnya's capital (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Additional research on this topic could engage in policy debates and help grassroots organizing efforts.

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