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“God Helped Us”: Resilience, Religion and Experiences of Gender-Based Violence and Trafficking among African Forced Migrant Women

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Abstract: In this article, I explore how faith and religion shaped the resilience of forced migrant women subjected to intersecting gender-based violence (GBV) and trafficking. Adopting a social constructivist perspective, I draw upon interviews with 11 Christian and 4 Muslim displaced survivors of 10 African nationalities temporarily residing in Tunisia. I first outline the experiences of intersecting violence to understand what displaced survivors were resilient to, and then describe faith pathways to resilience, sometimes with spiritual struggles and unmet religious needs. I delineate ways in which personal prayers and cooperating with God enabled all but one survivor to cope with exploitation and perilous journeys toward imagined refuge. I offer insights for practitioners working with forced migrants on the move and highlight the importance of spiritual support for displaced survivors who are religious. I discuss the findings and offer implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: resilience; coping; faith; religion; sexual; gender; intersecting; violence; trafficking; migration; refugee



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1. Background and Introduction

There is an emerging line of research on the intersection between gender-based violence (GBV), trafficking, forced migration, and religion. The high prevalence of GBV in forced migrant journeys has been established (Freedman 2016; Pertek et al. 2022), although the real-life scale of violence is unknown due to a range of reporting barriers, e.g., impunity, fear of contacting authorities, stigma, and shame. Growing evidence indicates exposure to trafficking as intrinsic to migratory pathways for both displaced women and men on the move (Fargues et al. 2020). Traffickers target forced migrants due to their precarious legal status and lack of protection. Victims are told they will be deported if they contact authorities and are silenced and exploited (Pertek et al. 2021). Trafficking of forced migrant victims is widespread, especially in countries where illegal entry is criminalised. With tighter borders and increasingly hostile immigration policies, forced migrants undertake more dangerous passing pathways, often relying on traffickers and smugglers.

In this article, I account for resilience to intersecting violence—GBV and human trafficking experiences—to capture the strength of survivors in coping with the severity of exploitation across forced migrant journeys. First, GBV has no single universal definition. For operational purposes, I draw upon IASC’s (2015) definition, widely used by the international community, which defines GBV as any harmful act perpetrated against a person’s will on the basis of their socially ascribed gender. GBV can be physical, sexual, and psychological and be perpetrated in the private or public sphere. Experiences of GBV can be conceptualised as ongoing with multifaceted consequences and multiple traumas. The harm done by sexual violence is more than a single trauma (Wasco 2003).

Second, I conceptualise human trafficking as a widespread category of exploitation in the continuum of violence in forced migration (Krause 2015), the risk of which increases along migration routes. I note that trafficking differs from smuggling, and these differences

generate much debate about their respective definitions. By trafficking in persons, I mean exerting control over individuals for prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labour, and slavery by means of coercion, deception, fraud, and power abuse (OHCHR 2000). Contrary to trafficking, smuggling involves movement across borders and migrants' consent, but is known to exacerbate vulnerability with severe power imbalances at play. Initial agreements to be smuggled can transform into trafficking as exploitative elements diachronically become evident (Kelly 2005).

Both trafficking and GBV constitute intersecting violence continued across forced migration experiences. The joint elements of these harms include exerting control, coercion, and power abuse. Trafficking often involves GBV, especially sexual trafficking, where sexual violence and psychological violence are embedded. Research demonstrates trafficked persons are subjected to high levels of violence (Ottisova et al. 2016). Gezie et al. (2019) showed that sexual violence was high in trafficking experiences among 671 Ethiopian female returnees, with around 35% prevalence during travel and 58% in countries of destination. GBV can also lead to trafficking exposure, for example, abusive partners of victims on spousal visas can force them into prostitution and domestic servitude (Goodson et al. 2020). Both GBV and trafficking entail severe mental and physical health impacts on victims (Ottisova et al. 2016). The length of time being trafficked and the multiplicity of GBV exposure are associated with the severity of mental health conditions and psychological distress, such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Oram et al. 2012; Barada et al. 2021; Ottisova et al. 2016). Therefore, it is helpful to conceptualise both concepts—GBV and trafficking—as mutually constitutive and reinforcing.

Nonetheless, forced migrant survivors of GBV and trafficking exhibit high levels of resilience (Gianesini 2018; Pertek 2022). There is no one definition of resilience in social science, but overall can be described as people's ability to bounce back after traumatic experiences (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013). Research demonstrates a relationship between faith, religion, and resilience among forced migrants, with religion operating as a key coping toolkit, particularly religious texts, joint prayers, metaphors of survival (Parsitau 2011), and religious rituals enabling healing (Gozdziak 2002). By definition, "religious coping" describes handling stress with the help of spirituality and religious beliefs (Pargament 1997). Religious coping provides people of faith with a religious framework from which they derive sacred meaning for their lives, with mixed positive and negative effects (Pargament et al. 2000). In this study, by faith I mean various forms of belief or trust in some form of transcendent reality, while religion refers to an institutionalised system of belief or practices regarding a supernatural power (Lunn 2009).

Studies also show forced migrants use a range of coping resources: personal qualities (e.g., courage, positivity, patience, and personal strength); social support from family, friends, and ethnic community; and broader social context, with religion and faith ranked as a foundation of resilience for many displaced people (Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012). Hawkes et al. (2020), in their systematic review of resilience in refugee women, identified religion as a key resource, followed by culture, children, social connections, family, education, and formal support. Ögtem-Young (2018) offered the term *faith resilience* to describe faith as an everyday tool of resilience among migrants in the UK. Likewise, Walker et al. (2012) emphasised the important role spirituality plays in survival and healing from humanitarian crises.

Minimal evidence, however, exists concerning faith resilience of displaced survivors of GBV and trafficking. Hodge (2020), in a study with men survivors trafficked into the USA, reported three-quarters of respondents used spirituality to cope. Prayer, turning to God, and church were essential elements of their coping processes in the aftermath of trafficking, alongside work that enabled contentment and focus. He argued for incorporating spirituality into holistic assessments with clients to help identify their strengths. Similarly, Lusk et al. (2021) reported that migrants and refugees from Central America and Mexico, subjected to various forms of violence, relied on their faith during their journeys and stay in the USA, alongside family and social connections and personal strength. Moreover, Gianesini (2018)

found faith as a driving resilience factor correlated with coping flexibility and positive life reappraisal among trafficked immigrant women in Italy. Using quantitative methods, she found that pre-migration socioemotional resources, such as intelligence, self-esteem, kin connection, faith, and temperament, were related and enabled coping behaviours. Faith was identified as a protective factor against exploitation.

Although research has conceptualised faith, spirituality, and religion as important resilience resources among forced migrants in refuge, limited evidence exists concerning displaced survivors of GBV and trafficking on the move and in transit countries. This paper aims to fill these research gaps by expanding the understanding of forced migrant survivors' resilience at different stages of their journeys. I begin by outlining methods and key findings, firstly the traumatic experiences of exploitation where faith helped respondents build resilience, and then exploring faith and religion-enabled resilience within the three subthemes: (1) the power of prayers, (2) cooperating with God to survive, and (3) spiritual struggles and unmet religious needs, followed by discussion and conclusions with practical recommendations.

2. Methods

This article offers an analysis from my PhD research project, which examined how religion influenced experiences of sexual and gender-based violence among forced migrant women in Turkey and Tunisia, exploring both risk and protective factors. Herein, I focus only on a segment of data from interviews in Southern Tunisia where influx of forced migrants was high, crossing borders daily from Libya, and the prevalence of trafficking and GBV perpetrated by non-partners was very high. Tunisia was selected as a research site due to diversity of arriving migrants as the country increasingly became firstly a diversion route for migrants seeking to take risky sea-crossings and secondly a place of sanctuary for migrants fleeing violence in Libya. Tunisia remains a country of transit and settlement without an operational asylum system but with a protection system administered by international organisations.

Adopting a social constructivist lens, I focus on in-depth interviews undertaken in 2019 with 15 forced migrant women survivors of GBV and trafficking, and five service providers supporting survivors. I sought respondents from the Sub-Saharan Africa regions as they represented the diversity of migrants in Tunisia and undertook journeys through different geographical routes. In total, there were 2 refugees and 13 refused asylum seekers of 10 different nationalities (five Nigerian, three Congolese, and two Ivorian, as well as one each of Eritrean, Ghanaian, Guinean, Sierra Leonean, and South Sudanese). Three-quarters of respondents resided in migrant shelters run by international organisations and NGOs. Eleven women were Christian and four were Muslims, aged 18 to 44. All respondents were identified as survivors of multiple forms of GBV (13 of sexual violence) and exploitation, of whom eight were also victims of trafficking, nine were kidnapped, and eight were detained. Service providers varied from NGO to INGO workers at various levels of seniority, who directly supported migrants daily. All forced migrant interviewees fled their countries either due to war, risks of violence, severe poverty, or discrimination in their home countries. They passed through Libya, and most were rescued from drowning during the Mediterranean Sea crossings toward Europe. Intercepted in North Africa, most planned to continue their journeys to imagined destinations. Survivors exhibited high levels of psychological distress compounded by daily stressors, such as asylum rejection or death of family members in their home country.

Particularly suited to researching sensitive topics, semi-structured interviews ensured respondents could tell their stories in their own way and set the pace, allowing for unexpected but productive turns and digressions (Gubrium et al. 2012). Six interviews in French and two in Arabic were interpreted live by skilled and trusted local interpreters. Seven interviews were conducted in English by the author alone. Interview lengths ranged from 60 to 90 min. Throughout this research, interpreters played an essential role in producing knowledge, and I have reflected on their engagement across the research process.

Interviews were recorded, and once transcribed, recordings were destroyed. Verbatim transcriptions were conducted from the interviewee's original language to English to ascertain the interpretation of women's narratives besides live interpretations. The transcriptions were coded in NVivo, using systematic thematic analysis to obtain a rich data account (Braun and Clarke 2006). Codes were rearranged multiple times in an iterative and inductive process to make sense of the data but matching the priority codes derived from the topic guide of the interviews, which matched the interview contents. Themes were identified and merged or broken into smaller themes, ensuring distinctions between them. The analysis developed over time, and thematic maps helped verify the relevance of identified themes in light of the entire dataset. When asked what helped them cope, most respondents spontaneously mentioned religion as their source of resilience and coping. I identified prayers and spiritual experiences of empowerment as important components of forced migrant survivors' resilience in Tunisia.

Ethical approval was acquired from the University of Birmingham Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee. Some participants were recruited with the help of two NGOs supporting migrants in Southern Tunisia and others through snowballing and recommendation of previous participants. Information was given verbally and written in three languages (English, French, and Arabic) via a "WhatsApp" message from a designated research phone. Inclusion provisions were made with an audio recording for illiterate participants. I engaged potential interviewees in an initial conversation explaining the study's purpose, topics involved, and potential emotional risks during the interview. Participation criteria excluded adults with visible signs of severe trauma to minimise risks of further harm and minors. Most respondents did not disclose experiences of violence and exploitation before the interview. Informed consent was sought, and once obtained, interviews commenced. Participants could withdraw until four weeks after the interview. I followed a security protocol to ensure safety was prioritised for participants, researchers, and interpreters, and followed a sensitive and empathetic procedure to interview. Service referrals were provided to those who required support. To minimise emotional risks for the researcher and interpreters, a restricted number of interviews were conducted each day, and access to clinical supervision was provided by the University of Birmingham.

3. Findings

3.1. Seeking Asylum and Experiencing Violence and Exploitation

I begin by outlining women's experiences of violence and exploitation, helping to first understand "what were the survivors resilient to?". Almost all respondents were subjected to conflict-related violence either in their country of origin or conflict-torn transit countries, e.g., Libya, and many continued to experience the impacts of conflict violence throughout their journeys. Thirteen women experienced sexual violence in transit in Libya, and two women experienced other types of GBV. Eight women were trafficked and enslaved. Service providers estimated that most migrant women arriving in Tunisia from Libya were subjected to GBV and exploitation.

"... when I ask them—all of them they get problems. They were raped, they were bad treated ... 90% of the women I have seen, they say they get problems in Libya. They were raped or they were abused ..." (Salim, Chair of a Tunisian NGO)

Interviewees fled their countries and sought asylum overseas for different reasons. Most fled war, violence, religious and political persecutions (DRC, Ivory Coast, Sudan), gender discrimination, and military conscription (Eritrea). Some fled extreme poverty, social exclusion, and intersecting discrimination (Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia). Two fled harmful practices, such as forced marriage (Cameroon) and FGM/C (Sierra Leone). Several respondents intentionally travelled to Libya for work and became displaced when the country descended into lawlessness. Most respondents described life-threatening migratory pathways in which they faced violence by border controls, traffickers, smugglers, militia, authorities, and other actors. Some interviewees categorised undignified and risky journeys as violence against women, and for a minority, these experiences became grounds for

their refugee claims. Sophia from the DRC was forced to engage in transactional sex for travel passes at different geographical points during transit from DRC to Libya, and into prostitution in Libya. She was 1 of 13 respondents who experienced sexual violence in transit and one of eight who were raped in detention. She considered her journey itself a form of violence:

“When I was leaving Libya, in the house where we were waiting to be brought to Europe, with the man who I was collaborating with . . . they moved us to another house. Women, on another side, in another house, men, on the other side . . . And from this moment, they started raping us. It was no longer about the trip. We didn’t see the man [smuggler] anymore . . .” (Sophia from the DRC, Christian, Irregular migrant)

Women were often forced at gunpoint to engage in sexual relations. Some respondents witnessed other migrant women dying from sexual exploitation. Displaced women described feeling powerless, with many losing control over their lives and lacking any support. Limited protection on the move, lack of legal routes to asylum, closed borders, delayed resettlement procedures, and hostile immigration environments prolonged most respondents’ journeys, resulting in destitution and heightened exposure to GBV, without personal belongings, food, and water across the sea, land, and desert, with some losing their children.

Sophia was also one of five respondents forced into prostitution, which led to food deprivation and pregnancy from rape. Eight trafficked women and one non-trafficked respondent were kidnapped by smugglers of various nationalities. Orisa was one of the trafficked women deceived in Nigeria with a promise of decent work in Libya, who was terrorised with weapons, sold, and subjected to extreme exploitation in Libya:

“If I don’t allow men to sleep with me, they will beat me . . . There are plenty of girls, they would lock us in a room and many men would come and sleep with us, they would collect the money”. (Orisa from Nigeria, Christian, Irregular migrant)

Orisa described her entrapment as modern slavery. Even after falling pregnant, she was induced to premature labour to return to forced prostitution quickly. Other women who became pregnant told of being denied access to medical assistance, giving birth in prisons or private houses, some mentioning the loss of a child. Respondents reported that they were targeted and exposed to heightened levels of violence and exploitation because of their visible “otherness”, belonging to an “othered” race, and being a migrant. They were exceptionally vulnerable because they were unable to pay smuggling fees and ransom, which extended detention and captivity. Some had their passports confiscated and were sold into prostitution, unable to pay substantial charges for release. Many respondents lost kin contact during migration, reducing their pool of available support.

Lengthy resettlement procedures and limited protection contributed to the perpetuation of violence against migrants left without support. Several women who shared accounts of their asylum applications were refused or took a long time in Libya or Tunisia. In these periods of waiting, respondents, such as Asia, were often repeatedly victimised, captured, and exploited. Asia fled Sierra Leone facing community oppression upon refusing to perform FGM/C. She tried to travel to Europe from Libya by a boat, which capsized and left 53 migrants dead. Asia saved herself and an unaccompanied boy and was transported to Tunisia. After living in destitution, she applied to IOM for resettlement to another country, Papua New Guinea. After being refused, she returned to Libya intending to reach Europe, where she was kidnapped and forced into prostitution for six weeks, becoming pregnant by rape. After being exposed to severe sexual exploitation in Libya, her refugee case was accepted in Tunisia, although her initial asylum application, pre-kidnapping in Libya, was refused.

Similarly, Halima, fleeing war in Sudan, was exposed to additional risks while waiting for her asylum application to be processed in Libya, which was delayed due to bureaucratic errors and lost documents. Therefore, she had to re-apply for asylum twice. While moving between Tripoli and southern Libya in search of safety during the ongoing conflict, she

faced violence, especially when militia captured and tortured her husband for a ransom she could not pay.

... We registered [for refugee status] in 2014. They didn't follow it for two years ... After that, I came in 2018 and renewed the registration ... We wanted to go to another country ... Last April 2019, there was war in the place we were living [in Libya] ... we went to the shelter ... the militias kept coming ... [dressed] as the police officers ... Libya is unsafe ... there's discrimination in Sudan, ethnic cleansing and women get raped ... I applied for asylum ... They are going through the procedures, but it's very slow" (Halima from South Sudan, Muslim, Refugee)

Lengthy asylum procedures contribute to making invisible the exploitation of forced migrants, as in the case of Asia and Halima, and push desperate applicants to take risky sea crossings seeking asylum. In addition, in the early COVID-19 pandemic conditions, all resettlement assessments were halted, placing respondents under greater stress and intensifying feelings of hopelessness (Phillimore et al. 2021; Pertek et al. 2020). Even those granted refugee status in Tunisia lived below the poverty line and waited to be resettled for years at risk of exploitation. Refused asylum and resettlement applications meant forced migrants became irregular migrants, increasing their anxiety, hopelessness, and insecurity, and at worst, culminating in suicidal ideation. Some gave up waiting under conditions of deprivation and decided to continue toward Europe via risky sea crossings, exhibiting incredible resilience mostly derived from faith and religion, as I explore next.

3.2. Faith and Religion-Enabled Resilience

With the absence of support services post-exposure to violence during their journey and stay in Libya, respondents relied on their own available means of coping, belief system, inner strength, and socio-emotional resources. Interviewees were asked what helped them cope with their experiences. Almost all (n = 14) instantly responded with God and their faith. Moreover, all but one stated that they believed in God and that religion was important in their lives. Some also mentioned personal qualities, inner strength, life lessons from their parents, and desire to ensure a better future for their children. They were then further probed about religious coping methods. Prayers and direct relationships with God, derived from their spiritual capital, were most cited in helping respondents survive unspeakable hardships. Only a minority mentioned reading religious scriptures, as these became unavailable in displacement. In addition, most women facing food scarcity fasted to get closer to God and have their prayers accepted. Overall, communal religious resources were less reported than personal religious resources.

3.2.1. "I Had Hope ... I Imagined, I Prayed": The Power of Prayers

In hopeless and powerless situations generated by GBV and trafficking in displacement, losing control over their bodies, and movement in treacherous journeys and captivity, survivors held onto prayers as a rock and "a secret weapon". Personal prayers enabled survivors to imagine an alternative future. Despite the unspeakable hardship, the majority reported that their faith had strengthened as a result of traumatic experiences.

"After all these events, I had not lost faith. I had hope that God would do something. Often, I imagined, I prayed, I prayed. It made me stronger." (Anisa from Ghana, Christian, Irregular migrant)

Entrusting their lives to God and emboldened by their ultimate faith, migrants sometimes took desperate and life-threatening decisions in their journeys, seeking safety. A psychologist working with forced migrant survivors noted:

"Sometimes we ask them 'you know it's very difficult and dangerous to take the sea, and why do you want again to go? You are a survivor ... 'He said 'no, God is doing everything for me. If I have to die, ok' ... God will decide if I will arrive, or I will die, I will do it' ..." (Sarah, Psychologist, INGO, Tunisia)

Most respondents drew strength from their faith to continue their trajectories toward desired destinations and adapted prayers to changing circumstances of migration. For example, in detention and forced prostitution, aloud prayers transformed into silent internal prayers, and prayers normally performed by one's body (kneeling, bowing etc.) transformed into mental prayers, where women continued talking to God in their thoughts, as they desperately sought help. Without access to prayer spaces or religious texts, and with a minority fearing sanctions for spoken-out-loud prayers in Libyan detentions, survivors would intensify "inward worship" through individual silent prayers:

"...for Libya we don't have a chance to pray ... it made me fired because instead of what you are supposed to speak out, you speak inside". (Sophia from DRC, Christian, Irregular migrant)

Survivors' faith continued to manifest in their attachment to prayers. Regular prayers throughout the day and night were an integral part of survivors' lives. Nathalie from the DRC said: *"Prayer is like water, water, you drink every time ... You are feeling, you need it"*. The majority prayed daily following their faith traditions; three Muslim respondents aimed to maintain their daily five prayers, one desired but did not know how to pray due to illiteracy, while Christian respondents tended to pray in the morning and evening. Muslim respondents also relied on *dhikr*, a ritual litany glorifying God.

However, interviewees' prayers fluctuated during challenges of forced migration. While in transit, respondents relied heavily on intimate prayers for survival, whereas in refuge the daily stressors, such as inadequate accommodation and missing close relatives, could distract survivors from maintaining regular prayers, similar to reading religious texts. Some survivors, such as Naila, said psychological distress decreased their frequency of prayer:

"When I was in Guinea, I was praying frequently, but since I left Guinea I am not praying that frequently because my mind is not at rest, when I was in Libya I wasn't at peace ..." (Naila from Guinea, Muslim, Asylum-seeker)

Asia, whose account was mentioned earlier, was one of the respondents who escalated her prayers while sex trafficked, holding onto and altering her praying practice. She was the only respondent who sought an online consultation with a religious leader after experiencing severe sexual violence and trafficking in Libya. She wanted to clarify her spiritual position and whether she could ever marry after multiple rapes. Asia survived drowning in the sea and sex trafficking while passing through Libya twice. She believed God gave her strength to rescue herself from drowning and save another life. During sexual trafficking, she adapted her five daily prayers: performing "dry" ablution without water and praying at assumed times and an unknown direction of her prayers toward Mecca while confined in a room without windows. She increased her prayers, finding in them hope and distraction from sexual violence:

"I assume now is 2 o'clock or 4 o'clock, or isha [night prayer], fajr [pre-sunrise prayer], so I just stand and pray just like that ... I pray with surah [a Qur'an's chapter] ... sometimes I say these ... astaghfarallah ['I seek forgiveness in God'], I use it and count it, sometimes, I count it over one thousand times ... So, I was more prayerful than ever because I don't have anything to do, expect from the people that normally came and rape us ... [I] cry and talk to God ... I was so weak ... I just lean to the wall ... and I pray ..." (Asia from Sierra Leone, Muslim, Refugee)

Some were too unwell to uphold religious practices while sex trafficked, but often asked God for help, sometimes questioning their faith in unbearable circumstances. Asia continued to plead to God for her freedom, having no means to pay her ransom. She believed she managed to barely escape thanks to acceptance of her prayers and the help of a guard who let her go, risking his life. Reaching Tunisia on foot, she gave birth to twins born of sexual violence. The survival of the two close-to-death experiences led her to intensify

fasting and prayers for her resettlement. Reaching out online to an imam for guidance, she was offered spiritual support:

“He directed me and encouraged me to pray more . . . He says to me . . . to be strong, God will do everything fine for me, I should not cry and should not worry for things are out of my control, the only thing that I can do is to just pray . . .” (Asia from Sierra Leone, Muslim, Refugee)

Survivors such as Asia drew enormous strength from their prayers which they deployed to cope with abuse. Nonetheless, some respondents regretted losing the opportunity to undertake communal prayers during migration. For example, before migration, Orisa used to attend study groups at her church every Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. During migration, she found no church. At times and in close-to-death experiences, she questioned God for her fate in transit and forced prostitution and felt abandoned, yet she reported that overall, her survival of sex trafficking strengthened her faith. Although most survivors mainly prayed alone, some occasionally prayed in a small group with family, friends, roommates, and sometimes co-ethnic neighbours. Orisa, for example, occasionally prayed with her sister and celebrated religious holidays, but mainly relied on her inner prayers and with online faith groups. Moreover, some Christian respondents occasionally attended communal prayers through social media, depending on mobile data availability. Those living outside shelters met with friends at private housing, including for religious activities, such as singing and online prayers.

3.2.2. “God Gave Me Power . . .”: Cooperating with God to Survive

For many, trusting in and praying to God in situations of sex trafficking, smuggling, and kidnapping were strategies to cooperate with God through seeking his care and stronger connection. In doing so, women put their survival plans into action with the divine (Pargament et al. 2000). Respondents talked about experiencing spiritual empowerment, which enabled coping mechanisms and, ultimately, survival. Having witnessed many other migrants’ deaths, they genuinely believed God saved them. During interviews, respondents repeatedly expressed their gratitude to God as their only saviour and centred on their God-enabled survival. They believed God watched over them by fortifying their inner strength so they could rescue themselves across seas and deserts and escape exploitation. Sharifa was one of the respondents who described how she had “already” died while trapped in modern slavery and forced prostitution but was brought back to life:

“... the glory of God, it was God, because some in front of me died . . . I had already died, it was God who brought me back to life . . . I was praying when our boat cascaded, there were so many of us . . . some are not here today . . . even for the operation [invoked premature birth by her traffickers], after I gave birth to this boy . . . I thank God for everything . . . When I was in Libya and doing all these [forced prostitution], every day I go and cry to my God, so my God just takes me out of this place because I can’t go outside . . . they locked us inside . . . I thank God for making me alive today . . .” (Orisa from Nigeria, Christian, Irregular migrant)

Survivors considered God the most merciful for facilitating their escape, despite witnessing many people dying in their journeys and in war. Nearly all survivors praised God for the gift of life and expressed their gratitude numerous times. Gloria’s account is one among several survivors’ stories of receiving powers and protection from God in transit and a strengthening of faith. She pleaded to God for survival, doubted and timidly questioned God at terrifying times, but continued praying and felt empowered to survive and rescue her son:

“Thanks to God that he helped me to leave for Europe, he gives me protection. In Libya, God helps me to get through all of this . . . Of course my faith is stronger. We were travelling through the desert at 20:00 at night until 5 in the morning . . . You don’t know where you’re going. I saw a young boy shouting, ‘Mummy? I can see the sunrise, I can see lorries.’ These were the Jeeps that were coming to collect us. God helped us . . . Many

people die. God gave me power to help my boy ... To go from the beach, to swim ... I praise God every day ... When we were left in the desert, we had no one. It was God who took care of us in the Sahara ... Sometimes I say to God, why are you leaving me like this? I'm crying ... You start to talk and see that it does good ... God hears me ... you will see other people come and give food ... Glory to God ... It is not something you forget in your life." (Gloria from the DRC, Christian, Irregular migrant)

Gloria's story indicates that women's trust and connection with God played an active role across their perilous journeys, and continued prayers and invocations shaped their religious experience of what they believed was "a godly" empowerment. However, as illustrated in Gloria's citation above, exposure to extreme conditions of violence makes people of solid faith question their beliefs and challenge God. Timidly questioning God, they regained faith once they felt their prayers were being answered. Strength drawn from religious beliefs and trust in God assisted many in powerless situations make sense of their experiences. However, with lacking spiritual care, loss of resources, and ruptures in social connections with faith communities they once belonged to, respondents talked about spiritual pain affecting their mental health, as discussed next.

3.3. "Every Day I Ask God...": Spiritual Struggles and Unmet Religious Needs

In GBV and trafficking experiences, religious needs emerge from survivors' religious identity and belief system and relate to their practical and health needs. Although survivors often interpreted their adversity through the lens of faith to find relief, faith attachments could also exacerbate trauma and hinder recovery. Nathalie suffered from high psychological distress as a result of her asylum application being rejected twice while in Tunisia and, in desperation, questioned God for it:

"Every day I ask God, I know the question is not good ... 'why did you abandon me?' ... I pray to God to remember about me to change my life ... (sobbing) ... Every day I used to ask why are you leaving me to suffering like this ..." (Nathalie from Nigeria, Christian, Refused asylum seeker)

The spiritual suffering of survivors was transcendent and invisible, often difficult for people outside their faith tradition/non-religious observers to comprehend, yet genuinely interrelated with their wellbeing. After lengthy and life-threatening journeys, some were given basic protection upon arrival to Tunisia, which rarely accounted for faith-related needs. For some survivors, lack of support for these religious needs generated emotional and spiritual suffering not accounted for by service providers. Indeed, interventions overlooked the role of faith in forced migrant survivors' trauma and coping mechanisms. With the interconnected and varied religious and psychosocial needs of survivors (Williamson and Robinson 2006), some women emphasised that religious needs were akin to their other needs and wished they were better attended:

"They [religious needs] are my primary needs, they are equal to other needs ... They are important to me because nobody would exist without God ..." (Violette from Ivory Coast, Muslim, Irregular migrant)

Nonetheless, faith-related needs of survivors of GBV and trafficking in displacement were not considered and were almost entirely unmet by service providers responding to immediate and visible needs. For example, a psychologist supporting forced migrants engaged with religion during therapy only when clients raised such a need, but she preferred to avoid spiritual tensions to not deter recovery of victims.

"I don't bring up the religion ... but sometimes ... one person needs to talk about God ... will say 'why God made all this happen to me, or why God forgot about me?'. Then you have to talk about it, so we talk ... I don't see it as important as much, only if a person is in need ... because sometimes they will tell you that 'I am punished by God' ... 'maybe I did something wrong' ... With some psychological troubles you cannot bring religion because it will make the person feel worse." (Sarah, psychologist, INGO, Tunisia)

Yet, spiritual pain for some survivors often continued to be unresolved and they wished to address it. They desperately needed to read the Bible or the Qur'an in a mother tongue to connect with the supernatural power they valued and to make sense of their experiences. Most lost belongings across perilous journeys, including religious accessories and mobile phones, which some used to keep religious applications. Literate Christians asked for a Bible, whilst literate Muslims wished for an English or French copy of the Qur'an, which was only available in Arabic. Nathalie from Nigeria, who lost her son in a sea rescue operation, previously survived kidnapping and detentions and developed a mental health condition and heart disease, and also thought about suicide. She felt spiritually deserted as she could not access the Bible nor speak to a pastor. She put hopes of rebuilding her life through reconnection with the Bible:

"If I had Bible, I would have life again now, because everything about me is a loss, so if I have Bible I could have hope, every day it could talk to me. At the moment, I have nothing, so I would pray, sit, think ... I could start live again, because inside me I am crying, I have pain ... Bible could help me and teach me about life ... give me more courage."
(Nathalie from Nigeria, Christian, Refused asylum seeker)

However, restricted access to a religious text in displacement meant depriving some survivors, such as Nathalie, of hope and coping capacity. Access to scripture was essential for some women to facilitate healing as survivors who were religious. Moreover, there was a short supply of prayer spaces, with migrant shelters not providing a designated room. Before displacement, respondents regularly attended places of worship, whereas in countries of transit and refuge, they lacked such opportunities. Women belonging to diverse branches of Christianity¹ wished to attend places of worship and religious ceremonies but had neither means of transportation nor adequate finances. Churches, pastors, and priests in faraway locations were barely accessible and only through personal referrals. The nearest church for one congregation was 100 km away in Djerba. Of the international agencies operating in the region, two service providers organised sporadic church visits annually for festive celebrations but only for one faith denomination with the nearest church available, while forced migrants represented various denominations. Two Muslim refugee women from West Africa used to visit mosques regularly for Friday prayers in southern Tunisia. Language barriers and accessibility issues restricted two other Muslim survivors from visiting mosques. Overall, most survivors wished to attend places of worship more frequently.

Finally, most women also hoped that contact with a respected religious figure would allow self-validation of their pain and progress toward religious closure of spiritual struggles. They needed reassurance from sacred knowledge beyond their reach to clarify internalised beliefs associated with abuse experienced. For instance, women's perception of violence as destiny or punishment led some to self-perpetuate trauma. As described earlier, only Asia accessed guidance from a religious leader online. Despite tenacious faith, many were left with unresolved feelings, sometimes of guilt, abandonment, and questioning God. Referral pathways to trusted faith and spiritual leaders were unavailable, and there was little awareness of where survivors could seek religious guidance post-GBV and trafficking exposure. In sum, lack of spiritual care and unfulfilled religious needs, such as a desire to read religious scripture, undermined the healing of respondents.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, I presented resilience of forced migrant survivors of GBV and trafficking and how faith and religion enabled them to develop pathways to resilience, which also entailed psychological ability to survive severe exploitation. First, my analysis expands the understanding of the continuum of violence in forced migration to intersecting experiences of GBV and trafficking in transit contexts. As Canning (2017) pointed out, in an intersectional continuum of violence, different forms of violence intersect. In my study, one violence enabled the other, creating a spiral of violence (Pertek 2022), wherein the patterns

of violence widened as the forced migrant journey was prolonged, congruently to [Krause's \(2015\)](#) and [Nagai et al.'s \(2008\)](#) observations.

I demonstrate the violent interface between GBV, trafficking, and restrictive asylum systems—for some, the latter created an environment in which trafficking and international organised crime were indirectly enabled. GBV and trafficking were mutually constitutive; one abuse led to another. In some accounts, it is difficult to separate GBV and trafficking as they intertwine and could be described as intersecting forms of violence across the continuum of violence. Conflict-induced mobility and displacement potentials of extreme poverty often triggered people to flee and take irregular migratory pathways, in the absence of sufficient legal routes, at high risk of trafficking and exploitation without protection and resources. A forced migrant journey itself often became a form of violence ([Pertek 2022](#)), with numerous hazards and incidents of GBV perpetrated by various actors ([Freedman 2016](#); [Phillimore et al. 2021](#)). Moreover, GBV and trafficking experiences during forced migration routes sometimes became an additional basis for claiming asylum for those fleeing persecution from a dysfunctional state.

Second, this paper highlighted the importance of faith and religion in resilience mechanisms and the psychological survival of sexual exploitation and trafficking survivors during forced migrant journeys. As a significant resilience factor, religion requires integration into resilience frameworks in research and practice ([Pertek 2021](#)). Personalised religion, manifested in faith and individual prayers, appeared in women's narratives as an antidote to harms engendered by hostile environments, conflicts, and lawlessness, with which displaced survivors imagined ultimately reaching safety. For African survivors of trafficking and GBV residing in Tunisia, as shown herein, faith-based resilience to exploitation helped them escape and continue journeys to refuge. These valuable faith resources of survivors need to be recognised and drawn upon to facilitate their recovery efficiently ([Hodge 2020](#)).

Women's belief systems and prayers were often the main resource helping them manage stress, emotional pain, and fear, forming a process known as *religious coping* ([Pargament et al. 2000](#)). Their religious resources were real life, spatial, and temporal, and they adapted these resources to cope with new contexts when they thought the world had failed and abandoned them. Faith became the only power that sustained them psychologically and allowed them to reimagine an alternative future ([Pertek 2021](#)). In conditions of powerlessness—common to experiences of sexual exploitation—prayers and connecting with God enabled coping behaviours which operated as adaptation strategies to survive appalling conditions, but not necessarily improve wellbeing ([Lazarus and Folkman 1984](#)). Drawing on prayer and metaphysical connection with the supernatural power, respondents felt empowered to handle severe psychological distress in extreme circumstances. Such observations are congruent with wider studies on religion and psychology, showing the powerful functions of faith in crises and among terminally ill populations. Reflecting [Bonanno et al. \(2007\)](#), respondents indeed developed unexpected pathways to resilience on the basis of their faith, enabling them to function amid traumatic events. I show that faith resilience ([Ögtem-Young 2018](#)) for many survivors was an “antidote” to vulnerability ([Fineman 2017](#)) created by circumstances beyond their control.

Overall, my findings are consistent with wider literature on migrant resilience, evidencing the importance of religion in resilience and everyday coping of African forced migrants ([Babatunde-Sowole et al. 2016](#)). Congruently to other studies with survivors of exploitation and violence ([Hodge 2020](#); [Parsitau 2011](#); [Gianesini 2018](#)), I show that faith kept women survivors going and enabled them to strive for asylum against the odds of mistreatment experienced during their perilous journeys. Faith, therefore, served as a buffer to the harms that increasingly hostile immigration policies inflict upon displaced populations. Faith helped survivors cope with the uncertainty of migration, when their asylum claims were processed, and with “violent inaction” ([Davies et al. 2017](#)) when states took no action to help vulnerable displaced populations. Similarly in my study, restrictive immigration policies and the absence of the rule of law exposed migrants to extreme violence in detention and prisons. For instance, Libya, a non-signatory of the

1951 Refugee Convention, criminalised all entry into the country and detained forced migrants. Moreover, international agreements aimed at strengthening borders and use of detention centres (Akkerman 2021) prolonged respondents' journeys and increased their vulnerabilities. With lacking sufficient legal routes to asylum matching the scale of global forced displacement, migrants taking risks to reach safety without protection and resources relied on what was within them—their beliefs in the supernatural that they deemed could enable them to reach safety. However, survivors at times lost faith in the most hopeless situations, sometimes leading to spiritual struggles—i.e., psychological distress of spiritual nature—such as a feeling abandonment and punishment by God. With spiritual struggles, often related to PTSD symptoms (Brende cited in Gozdzia 2002), their mental health was adversely affected.

Moreover, by providing new evidence on religious coping in the experiences of violence and trafficking among forced migrants, I demonstrate that religion and faith were part of women's displacement experiences and thus shaped their spiritual experience of migration (Wilson and Mavelli 2016). Migrant women underwent deep religious experiences, and migration experience for some was indeed an extension of theology (Winkler 2017), wherein their faith was tested and embodied religious metaphors of survival. Therefore, I argue that religion, as an inseparable part of the intersecting GBV and trafficking experiences for many people, profoundly influenced both manifestations of faith and the ways in which displaced survivors of faith experience exploitation.

Finally, the paper underscores the impact of unmet spiritual and religious needs. The humanitarian system has resigned religion to a private category of human experience (Ager and Ager 2011), while experiences of survivors demonstrate the need to recognise and respond to the religious dimension of their suffering. The religious identity of people on the move and their religious coping mechanisms are often disregarded by practitioners and researchers. Notwithstanding, global trends show most migrants affiliate with a religion (PEW Research Center 2012), and their faith moves with them across borders (Knott 2016). Having once belonged to a local faith community, now, despite the disruption, many still hold onto what moves with and dwells inside them—religion, faith, and spirituality (Rutledge et al. 2021).

The evidence presented herein calls for service providers to recognise survivors' multidimensional and holistic needs, recognising the spiritual needs of displaced populations are interconnected with their material needs. It is also important for faith actors to be increasingly engaged in responses to forced displacement and for the humanitarian sector to engage trusted faith partners to leverage their potential in assisting the unique needs of forced migrants in crises. For example, survivors in Tunisia repeatedly said they could not afford to travel to the northern part of the country to find a church. Therefore, faith institutions need to consider extending their outreach and spiritual care to displaced people in need, among others offering psychosocial assistance to help them resolve spiritual struggles and move on with their lives. Likewise, faith actors should strengthen their capacities and commitments to prevent and respond to GBV, trafficking, and other forms of violence, dismantling misconceptions and challenging the stigma around survivors in faith communities. Conversely, mainstream service providers should not avoid discussing faith matters with their clients if they express such needs. Marginalising clients' worldviews in psychosocial therapies may be counter-productive and contribute to fragmenting displaced people's identities in ways undermining their recovery. As for the prevention and response to GBV and trafficking, mainstream interventions might consider undertaking integrated protection responses to all forms of gendered harm and efficiently scale-up responses to match the level of survivors' needs.

In sum, faith was a sustaining solution in hopeless circumstances for survivors of intersecting violence—GBV and trafficking—in forced migration. Women retained faith as a reminder of the greater good to come when there was no relief in sight. Faith and personalised religion arguably provided a life-saving resource to strive for survival and sustain tenacious hope for change.

Limitations

First, I draw upon a limited sample and displaced women's stories out of over 82 million forcibly displaced people (UNHCR 2021). However, the key recurring themes in this study indicate some level of the generalisability to comparative contexts for forced migrants. I offer these as potential themes for future research rather than claiming broad generalisability. Second, the study relied on two interpreters and two transcribers in documenting and validating the data and it cannot be certain that interpretations produced did not alter respondents' meaning in the process of word transition between different linguistic structures. Further research might explore the religious coping patterns among survivors of intersecting forms of violence in other migratory contexts, as well as how mainstream service providers and faith actors could respond to displaced survivors' holistic needs.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The dataset presented in this article is not readily available because the sensitive nature of the data means that there are ethical requirements stipulating data cannot be shared. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to author (email: s.m.pertek.1@bham.ac.uk; sandra.pertek@gmail.com).

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Notes

- ¹ Christian respondents identified themselves as Protestants, Catholics, Baptist, the Assembly of God, the Church of Christ.

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