

## Article

# Multiple Layers of Vulnerability: Having a Disability in an Honour-Based Context

Siv-Britt Björktomta 

Department of Social Work, Uppsala University, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden; siv-britt.bjorktomta@uu.se

## Abstract

Honour-based violence can be considered a serious global problem that involves violations of human rights, and having a disability may increase the risk of being subjected to violence. The purpose of this study was to investigate the situation and needs of persons with disabilities who have been subjected to honour-based violence. Interviews were conducted with a sample of seven women and three men aged 20–60 from different minority groups living in Sweden. All had different disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, PTSD, neuropsychiatric disabilities, mental illness, impaired hearing, deafness or deaf blindness. Thematic analysis was used, identifying four themes: A family context in the shadow of violence, Violence in different forms, Conditional belonging and The price of freedom. An intersectional perspective highlights how disability, in combination with gender, age, culture, religion and honour norms, increases vulnerability to control and violence. The common thread was the group's specific exposedness to various forms of violence. The results point to the importance of recognising the complexity of having a disability in an honour-based context. A broader perspective is necessary to develop both measures to prevent and combat this violence and support for those who have disabilities and live with protected identities.

**Keywords:** honour-based violence; disability; intersectionality; protected identity; honour norms

## 1. Introduction

Honour-based violence can be understood as a serious global problem that involves human rights violations (Bhanbhro et al. 2016). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2000) estimates that around 5000 girls and women are murdered each year to uphold the family's honour. Another important social issue at a global level is violence against persons with disabilities (United Nations 2006). Having a disability means being more vulnerable to all forms of violence (Jernbro et al. 2023; Swedish Agency for Participation 2023a, 2023b; Starke et al. 2024). Children and women with disabilities may be at even greater risk of being subjected to violence (Fang et al. 2022; Meyer et al. 2022) as well as to various forms of honour-based violence, including forced marriage (Clawson and Fyson 2017). It has also been found that professionals often lack knowledge about the link between intellectual disability and the risk of violence (Punzi et al. 2025).

Research emphasises that honour contexts are characterised by strong family norms, where control and restrictions often are directed at daughters but also can affect sons and other family members (Bredal 2006; Gill 2008; Baianstovu et al. 2019; Björktomta 2019; Olsson 2024). Restrictions often relate to friends and relationships, leisure time, mobile phones, the internet, clothing and make-up as well as access to financial resources



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(Björktomta 2019; Olsson 2022). Opportunities to make one's own life choices, such as choosing one's marriage partner, undergoing education or getting a job, are also described as limited (Gill 2008). Violations of honour norms can mean that the collective's honour and reputation must be restored by punishing the norm breaker, which can result in lethal violence. Even allegations or suspicion of sexual misconduct can lead to women experiencing honour-based violence, forced marriage or risk of being killed (Gill and Brah 2013). Although men generally have greater freedom of action than women (Björktomta 2012; Gill 2008), studies show that male victims may be harmed in ways that do not particularly differ from how women are harmed, such as through mockery and insults, coercive control, imprisonment in the home, emotional blackmail, psychological abuse, physical violence and forced marriage (Samad 2010; Bredal 2011; Idriss 2021).

The phenomenon of honour-based violence has been explored in a substantial body of literature within a variety of disciplines (Bhatia et al. 2024); however, there are still only a few studies in international literature that deal with this dual vulnerability of having a disability and living in an honour-based context (Baianstovu et al. 2025). Against this background, the present study seeks to increase the knowledge of the situation of individuals with disabilities living in these contexts.

### *Aim*

The aim of this study is to investigate how disability and honour-based violence interact from an intersectional perspective. More specifically, this is done by investigating the situation and the needs of individuals with disabilities who have been subjected to honour-based violence. The following research questions are addressed:

- How do these individuals describe their family relationships, both as children and as adults? What strengths and expectations are reflected in their accounts?
- What are their experiences of help and support from family members and the community in relation to their needs?

## **2. Previous Research**

Many Western societies, including Scandinavia, have a strong tradition of gender equality policies and an individualistic culture, which can contrast with that of families from more collectivist cultures (Puranen 2019). It is important to note that as Kağıtçıbaşı (2006)—distinguishing between family patterns and child rearing from an individualistic and a collectivist family perspective—reminds us, both family types can be warm and nurturing environments for children to grow up in, and both can be characterised by control, oppression and violence. In the same way, other studies (Smette et al. 2021) point out that the restrictions and control which parents with a migrant background more often are described to exert over their children can have both a protective and a limiting effect. However, control, coercion and restrictions can to varying extents be found in all kinds of families and relationships, and family abuse occurs across all ages and socioeconomic and demographic groups (Gangoli et al. 2024).

Honour-based violence has received more attention in Scandinavian countries over the past three decades than in many other Western countries (Elaies and Rabe 2025), and the understanding of the phenomenon has primarily been shaped by the accounts of young female victims with foreign backgrounds (Liebmann 2019). Anitha and Gill (2009) describe a continuum of how family dynamics characterised by sociocultural expectations, control, persuasion, pressure, threats as well coercive control may restrict women to varying degrees (also see Björktomta 2012; Bhanbhro 2023). Drawing on an empirical study, Bates (2021) describes honour-based violence as a gendered phenomenon in which cultural values surrounding honour and shame are central components. Korteweg and Yardaku (2010)

relate honour-based violence to physical, psychological, sexual or emotional violence. Furthermore, a strong norm of heterosexuality as the ‘right’ thing is frequently described, which means that boys and men, binary and non-binary transgender people and LGBTQ people of all ages are at risk of being subjected to honour-based violence (Bates 2021; Idriss 2021; Lidman 2021).

In the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability is described as long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations 2006). Environmental factors are described both as possibly directly causing a disability and as influencing how an existing disability develops. Nilsson and Westlund (2007) have identified factors that together may explain the particular vulnerability of persons with disabilities, such as *dependency*, *invisibility* and *powerlessness*. They state that having a disability entails depending on one’s surroundings for managing everyday life and work, for communicating and for support and closeness. This could also mean having limited contact with the surrounding environment, meeting only a small number of caregivers who often are family members or relatives (Gunnarsson et al. 2020). Another common complication is that the acts of violence the person is subjected to are not regularly defined or treated as violent crimes. Age and gender are also significant in the sense that children, older people and girls/women often are more exposed (Swedish Agency for Participation 2017).

### 3. The Context

In Sweden, the issue of honour-based violence gained significant attention in the early 2000s following several high-profile murder cases of young women (Björktomta 2005; Carbin 2010). However, the extent of honour-based violence in Sweden is difficult to determine (City of Stockholm 2009; Ghadimi and Gunnarsson 2019; Cinthio 2020). A survey (N = 6002) indicates that between 7 and 9 per cent of young people in large Swedish cities live with honour norms related to violence, and up to 20 per cent live under norms that restrict their freedom of action (Baianstovu et al. 2019).

In recent years, the concept of honour-based violence has in Sweden increasingly become an umbrella term that also encompasses child marriage, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. A broad consensus has emerged among both authorities and researchers regarding the distinctive features of this violence, which the Swedish government describes as contrary to “the fundamental values of society” (Prop. 2024, p. 365). To strengthen criminal law protection against honour-based violence, new laws concerning honour-based crime have in recent years been enacted in Sweden (Prop. 2019). A new offence called *honour oppression* has been added to the Penal Code (1962, chap. 4, sct. 4e). This refers to repeated abusive acts motivated by a desire to preserve or restore the honour of a person’s family, relatives or other similar group.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Disability and Honour-Based Violence*

While research on disability and honour-based violence still is limited, some significant challenges are highlighted. Studies from Sweden (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Ouis 2018; Swedish Agency for Participation 2025; Cinthio 2025) and the United Kingdom (Clawson and Fyson 2017; Aplin 2018; McCarthy et al. 2021) show that forced marriage affects both men and women with intellectual disabilities (Gunnarsson et al. 2020), even in legal contexts where such practices are prohibited (McCarthy et al. 2021). Families may arrange forced marriages as a means to secure long-term care or support for a family member (Aplin 2018), sometimes due to limited awareness of legal protections or available public care services.

Research also indicates that public authorities—such as social services, the police and the justice system—struggle to identify and address vulnerability when intellectual disability or mental ill-health intersects with honour-based violence (Aplin 2018; Löfgren-Mårtenson and Ouis 2018; McCarthy et al. 2021; Cinthio 2025; Björktomta and Olsson 2025). The juridical system particularly emphasises the difficulty of drawing a line between coercion and consent in relation to individuals with intellectual disabilities, who are not always considered capable of understanding the meaning of marriage and thus of giving consent (Cinthio 2025). Additionally, Swedish authorities appear to pay limited attention to the heightened vulnerability of girls and women within these circumstances, despite their elevated risk (Swedish Agency for Participation 2023b).

In interview studies, professionals often describe individuals with disabilities who are living in an honour-based context as isolated and dependent on family and their surroundings, which they suggest makes it difficult to detect their vulnerability (Gunnarsson et al. 2020; Björktomta and Olsson 2025). They also point to a lack of knowledge and negative attitudes within certain families, both towards social institutions and when it comes to disability (McCarthy et al. 2021; Cinthio 2025). Professionals point to dependency making it difficult to distinguish between control and restrictions on the one hand and genuine care for a family member on the other (Aplin 2018; Gunnarsson et al. 2020). Furthermore, they express they find it difficult to understand and categorise the difficulties exhibited by the users as well as to determine whether or to what extent a user's difficulties stem from a disability or are symptoms or consequences of living in a violent environment or in an honour context (Björktomta and Olsson 2025).

## 4. Materials and Methods

Seven women and three men aged 20–60 years were interviewed. The participants had different forms of disabilities and different experiences of living in an honour context. The disabilities included intellectual disabilities, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), mental illness, depression, neuropsychiatric disabilities, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), impaired hearing, deafness and deaf blindness. All but one of the participants' families came from West Asia or Africa; one was a native of Sweden. Their family backgrounds differed regarding education as well as religion; seven were from Muslim families, two from Christian families and one family was described as secular. At the time of the interviews, six of the ten participants were living under protected identity due to threats of violence.

### 4.1. Interviews

Qualitative interviews were carried out in connection with a government assignment through the Swedish Agency for Participation. Participants were recruited in two ways: (i) The participants with intellectual disabilities and/or mental health issues were recruited with the help of staff at sheltered accommodation, who assessed that the participants were living in stable and secure circumstances and that their state of health allowed them to participate in the study. It was also necessary to ensure that the participant could not be subjected to reprisals, threats or violence as a result of participating in the interview. Initial information about the study was provided, with an emphasis on participation being voluntary and that it could be discontinued at any time without disadvantage to the participant. (ii) The participants from “the deaf world”<sup>2</sup> were recruited with the help of the National Women's Shelter and Support in Sign Language (in Swedish: *Nationell kvinnojour & stöd på teckenspråk*), which translated an informational advertisement into sign language in the form of a video and posted it on social media. The participants, who had contacted the organisation on their own initiative, also assessed their own situation in

terms of possible risks of reprisals, threats or violence that may result from taking part in the interview.

All interviews were conducted by the author, and all but one were conducted in person. One interview was conducted digitally at the participant's request. Interviewing people with disabilities requires interviewer competence and careful attention to context (Tuffrey-Wijne et al. 2008). The interviews were conducted in peace, without rushing the participants (Katsui et al. 2025), and in a context where there was knowledge and experiences of the issues to be investigated. The choice of interview setting and the design of the interview guide were based on the author's experience and prior knowledge of disability and honour-related violence in families. The primary goal was to create a safe foundation for the interviews by entering into the conversation with an open mind and with curiosity about the other person's story. One starting point was that trust is not only created through words but that body language also is an important tool for building a safe foundation. All participants had full command of Swedish, either spoken or sign language. In four cases, sign language interpreters or tactile sign language interpreters<sup>3</sup> were used. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. During two interviews, support persons were present and during all interviews, professionals were nearby in case support was needed afterwards.

#### 4.2. Ethics

The project received ethical clearance from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reg. no. XXX). The ethical principles that apply to research in the humanities and social sciences regarding the ethical review of research involving humans (Act 2003) have been thoroughly applied. Information has been provided both in writing and orally about the rights of research participants and how personal data is handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Specific information has been provided about the purpose of the research and the procedures involved in the research process. Before the interviews, the researcher also provided verbal information about the study and went through an illustrated consent form to ensure that the interview participant understood and also gave their consent to participate.

There is a growing awareness that people with disabilities can and should be involved as active participants (Mietola et al. 2017; Katsui et al. 2025), even in sensitive research areas such as honour-based violence. Hence, the study's implementation required rigorous ethical considerations, particularly given the vulnerability of the participants and the sensitive nature of the subject matter. The current topic underscores the necessity of balancing participant well-being with academic integrity (Mietola et al. 2017). A special circumstance to consider is that the deaf community in Sweden is a small group, which means that greater attention than usual needed to be paid to anonymising data on ethnicity, countries of origin and other personal information as well as presenting the results in such a way that the participants' privacy is protected.

#### 4.3. Analysis

There are different ways of looking at honour-based violence, and using an intersectional perspective (Lykke 2003) can be a way to bridge the polarisation and highlight the complexity. By examining if or how disability might interact with gender, age, culture/religion and honour norms, the analysis emphasises relationships and processes, where different relationships, dimensions and aspects of power, discrimination, oppression and dominance are understood as interrelated. Thus, the interviews have been analysed through the lens of intersectionality, using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) to search for common themes and differences in a form of data-driven analysis.

Although the method is usually described as a process with different stages, Braun and Clarke (2008) suggest that analysis is more of a recursive than a linear process. With the aim in mind, the interviews were first read through several times to create an overview of the material. The coding and theme development were guided by the explicit content of the interviews.

## 5. Results

The analysis resulted in four main themes, each with two sub-themes:

- (i) A family context in the shadow of violence:
  - a A strong normative context.
  - b Adverse childhood experiences.
- (ii) Violence in different forms:
  - a Honour-based violence in combination with disability.
  - b Violence resulting from disability and vice versa.
- (iii) Conditional belonging:
  - a Unconditional love?
  - b The deaf world—a greater scope for action.
- (iv) The price of freedom:
  - a Living with a protected identity.
  - b Collective and transnational norms of honour.

### 5.1. A Family Context in the Shadow of Violence

On an overall level, the results highlight a collectivistic family organisation and point to a wide variation regarding disabilities, education, religion, family relationships, current life situation and future plans. All but one described experiences of physical violence during their childhood. All of the participants had experiences of a family context with norms involving demands for virginity, an emphasis on chastity and obedience, and a strong norm of heterosexuality with marriage as the only ‘correct’ option, together with gender-specific norms regarding clothing. However, how the norms were implemented in families seemed to differ, with gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic factors, culture and religiosity as governing factors. There were also accounts of mental illnesses, substance abuse, disability, criminality and strong religiosity in the families.

#### 5.1.1. A Strong Normative Context

Even though all the participants came from what has come to be known as honour contexts, not all used the term or even knew what it meant. A man who was deafblind and had limited sign language skills could not relate to the concept of honour.

*Honour, what does that word mean? I don't know what that word means. Honour? I follow the rules and norms that exist in the group I belong to, in my family. (Man, 35+ years)*

For this man, his family's way of life seemed to be so naturally self-evident that he could not put it into words. Later in the interview it also became obvious that there was no room for reflection or critical questioning of the family's system of norms. However, the majority of the participants had knowledge of the concept and in different ways described an essence of an honour context. The emphasis was on the collective, which means that the interests of the individual must take a back seat to the norms embraced by the collective or the family. A man described the context of honour and explained how his mother reacted when she found out that he was gay:

*Then I'll let my son go. Because I think about everyone else around me, what my grandmother thinks, what my nieces and nephews will think. This [the son] is my nieces' and nephews' role model, it's not possible. Then you think about the collective and then you disappear as an individual, as a person, and you don't become the son that people think you should be. [According to] this norm. (Man, 20+ years)*

It was obvious that the collective played an important role in the everyday lives of the families by defining the boundaries of belonging, underpinned by rigid norms. The quote above describes a boundary between the individual and the collective that consisted of heteronormativity. When the son came out as gay, he violated this norm, which in turn threatened the mother's position in the community. In this case, the man described that his mother chose to maintain her position within the community, which required her to abandon him, her son. Several participants also described boundaries between the collective of the family and child- and adolescent psychiatry as well as social services. A concern emerged within the families about being misunderstood by social authorities. One woman described how she at the age of 12, together with her little brother who was 8, was taken into care by social services after a report of concern had been made.

*I was careful about what I said. Swedes can interpret it differently [...] Then they will take us away [from our family]. (Woman, 20+ years)*

A deaf man described that he was bullied in school because "he ran like a girl". As a child, he got into fights and also started to play truant from school. The school contacted child- and adolescent psychiatric services, but he was unable to explain why he got into fights and played truant. The fact that he was bullied because he was different, "girlish", remained unspoken:

*If something happens, if you have experienced something violent and been abused. [...] You don't talk to anyone outside the family. You don't talk about such things openly. That was my mother's attitude. (Man, 30+ years)*

In the quote above, two norms become clear: the norm of heterosexuality and the norm of keeping incidents of violence within the family. The man had difficulties communicating as a child partly due to his deafness and partly due to the strong norm of heterosexuality that existed in his family, but also because of the family's strong boundaries towards the outside world. The norms of honour thus interacted with the disability and meant that he did not receive help or support for the bullying he was subjected to as a child.

### 5.1.2. Adverse Childhood Experiences

The life growing up in these families within the boundaries of the norms, in an honour context, can in most cases largely be described with the concept of adverse childhood experiences (Webster 2022; Madigan et al. 2023). According to the literature, adverse childhood experiences can broadly be categorised into three types: (i) abuse: physical, emotional or sexual abuse; (ii) neglect: physical or emotional neglect; and (iii) household dysfunction. From the interviews, signs of all types of adverse childhood experiences could be identified in the families, except for one that lacked accounts of such experiences. However, in regard to the families' normative systems, several of the criteria for honour norms that are commonly described in research (Gill 2008; Ertürk 2009; Korteweg and Yardaku 2010; Idriss 2017; Björktomta 2019; Lidman 2021; Olsson 2024) were mentioned by all the participants. Most common were requirements of virginity for daughters, prohibition of boyfriends, emphasis on female obedience, parents or relatives deciding about the choice of partner, strong heteronormativity, LGBTQ prohibition as well as religious and/or rigid belief systems.

A man who was born deaf and had cochlear implants fitted as a child<sup>4</sup> described both parents with gratitude and in positive terms. He described his mother as his best friend during his childhood and said that his father had taught him important values about working life and what a father should be like. During his upbringing, the family learned sign language<sup>5</sup> at the same time as he learned to speak. However, in several of the countries of origin of the participants, there were no opportunities for education in sign language, and the other participants from the deaf community described various communication problems in their families. In one family, a hierarchy was described with the hearing siblings at the top, whom the father cared for and communicated with, while the two children who were deaf or deafblind were at the bottom of the hierarchy and received less attention. The deafblind man expressed that he never had a common language with his father:

*Dad doesn't sign. He's bad at it. Mum signs a little and is trying to learn. No, it's a strong cultural thing, but she's trying to learn a little. [. . .] Because Dad hasn't bothered with it. He doesn't want to learn sign language. He thinks it's wrong. [. . .] It's that thing about culture. (Man, 35+ years)*

The above quote highlights how disability and gender can interact with cultural<sup>6</sup> norms, in this case surrounding deafness, and causing feelings of shame over the deaf son. The cultural norms surrounding deafness in this family were pictured as strong and meant that the father's unwillingness to learn sign language also hindered him from communicating and developing a relationship with his son. However, in terms of gender, a difference was observed in how the parents handled their son's deafness. While the father refused to learn sign language, the mother's care for her son meant that she defied the cultural norms surrounding deafness, as she had learned a few signs to communicate with her son.

## 5.2. Violence in Different Forms

There were many stories of violence on a general level, involving latent violence, threats of violence, physical violence such as blows with hands and objects, and even threats with knives and pistols. There were also stories of material and economic violence as well as genital mutilation and rape. A woman who suffered from depression described a childhood marked by physical violence perpetrated by both parents:

*They either used objects or their hands. Then they hit you several times. Once I had to run away, but it was a bit hopeless because they chased after me. When I locked myself into the bathroom, I waited until I had calmed down. When I came out, they continued until they were satisfied. (Woman, 20+ years)*

The violence described in the quote highlights adverse childhood experiences, which were part of several of the participants' childhoods with stressful or traumatic events.

### 5.2.1. Honour-Based Violence in Combination with Disability

Part of the violence described appeared to be more directly linked to honour norms, and in some accounts, it was the combination with disability that emerged as a particular vulnerability. According to several of the participants, their position in the family as a result of their disability meant that love and support from their parents was not a given. A deafblind man described how he had been forced into marriage with a hearing relative in his country of origin. Despite communication problems, he eventually managed to convince his mother to let him get a divorce.

*We were sitting there on the plane and I started crying. My mother saw that and understood that I really didn't want to be married. (Man, 35+ years)*

This story shows that the norm of marriage as the only way of living and as a possible solution for the future of the deafblind man took precedence over the individual's free will; however, when the mother saw her son's tears, she relented and a divorce became possible. The son was allowed to divorce. However, he had to move back home to his parents. Living alone in his own flat was not an option.

Among the women, especially the two women who had intellectual disabilities, there were also accounts of strict control and severely limited freedom of action. For example, one of them was not allowed to have her own mobile phone or to go out without the company of her sister. As she pointed out: *"If my sister is ill, I cannot go to school."* Both of them described being raped. One of them had also been subjected to genital mutilation;<sup>7</sup> she stated that the decision, which had lifelong consequences for her, was made by her mother: *"They ruined my life. They decided to sew up my genitals."* The other one had been raped by her boyfriend when she was a teenager. The incident was reported to the police, but the boyfriend had gone free. About ten years later, she was still upset about the unfair outcome.

*Here is the police car and here is my ex-boyfriend. We are driving towards each other. My eyes meet his eyes. At this moment, I just want to go and hit him. I want to kill him, but I can't. That's how I feel. I got the punishment. I didn't do anything wrong, but I got the punishment. He got nothing. The police report has been dropped. The police have not helped me. (Woman, 25+ years)*

Gender and the norm of virginity here interact with disability and the justice system, which requires evidence for prosecution and conviction. Due to cognitive difficulties, she had difficulty explaining and defending herself, and her boyfriend was able to produce several witnesses who spoke in his favour; the investigation was dropped. The consequence was that the rapist went free and the violence from her family intensified due to the loss of virginity: *"Yes, but after they found out that I wasn't a virgin, they [my father and brothers] started hitting me even more."* However, she finally received help from the police to flee and to seek a protected identity.

In most of the interviews, the violence was described as occurring during childhood, but there were also examples of participants being subjected to violence by their parents as adults. A deaf man, who came from a very strongly Christian religious family, recounted when he, at the age of 30, told his mother that he was gay.

*When I told my mum I was gay. It was actually when my sister had her second kid. And my mum hit me. She said, couldn't you have waited? So, I think, my God, she hit me when I was younger, but she still hits me now that I'm an adult. She's spat at me. She's been really angry with me. (Man, 30+ years)*

This quote highlights how the norm of heterosexuality can interact with religiosity in a context of honour and how they together can superordinate disability, gender and age. It underscores previous findings suggesting that high religiosity is related to the rejection of homosexuality (Jenssen and Scheepers 2019).

#### 5.2.2. Violence Resulting from Disability and Vice Versa

Four of the five participants from the deaf world described that they never had effective communication with a common language in their family while growing up. All of them also described experiences of physical violence. A man explained how communication at home as difficult: *"There were a lot of misunderstandings. Many, many, many times we talked past each other."* In addition, the lack of knowledge of sign language among parents and siblings meant that violence in families often replaced words and signs.

*I have been slapped and other things many, many times. Pinched many times. Beaten, abused, several times. Many times. [...] I think they had a hard time understanding*

*me. They tried to talk to me and then there were conflicts. Maybe I didn't always behave myself at school and when I came home there was a conflict about it. And maybe they said a lot. But I didn't always understand what they said or what they meant. [...] And when I didn't understand, they got annoyed with me and that frustration escalated. And it wasn't communication in sign language, so that's how it turned out. Then there were misunderstandings over and over and over again. Which led to them fighting or hitting me instead. (Man, 30+ years)*

For four of the seven women, their experiences of violence seemed to have caused difficulties to such an extent that it had led to PTSD, depression and exhaustion syndrome, so much so that it affected their everyday lives. Sleeping problems with nightmares, lots of memory gaps, difficulties with anger management as well as with reading texts were described:

*This [experience of honour-based violence] has made me go to someone and I have been diagnosed with depression and PTSD. There are a lot of things that I have had since this happened. [I have] been given lots of diagnoses. Exhaustion was also one of them, as well as anxiety and things like that. [...] And then I get pills because I can't sleep at night. It's too difficult because I have a lot of nightmares. (Woman, 20+ years)*

This illustrates how adverse childhood experiences with limited freedom of action and no opportunity to develop her own will had negative consequences for the young woman and in the long run even led to disabilities. It is also in line with the growing body of literature identifying adverse childhood experiences as both a common and a major contributor to mental ill-health (Chen et al. 2025).

### 5.3. Conditional Belonging

The strongest theme, which also permeated all the interviews, pertained to stories of conditional belonging. During the interviews, rigid belief systems were described where belonging was based on both cultural and religious norms from Islam as well as from Christianity.

#### 5.3.1. Unconditional Love?

The norm of heterosexual marriage was pictured as strong in most of the families. A woman from a strict Muslim family described herself as non-religious, bisexual and with mental health issues as a result of honour-based violence. She had broken with her parents but lived in constant fear that they would find her, despite her protected identity.

*If they catch me, I think I might be forced into marriage. Beaten, of course. [...] It would happen even if I didn't have a girlfriend. [...] It's about control, about everything. About religion, culture. My way of thinking ... there's a big difference between my way of thinking and their way of thinking. It's impossible to agree. (Woman, 20+ years)*

Also here, it is highlighted how gender, sexuality, religion and culture can interact in an uncompromising movement with two different outcomes: either abuse and a heterosexual marriage, or a life of freedom but without security or family ties.

One of the deaf men, who had an academic education and described himself as gay, had not been subjected to threats or physical violence, yet reflected over his relationship with his parents with sadness in his voice.

*I think there is such a thing as unconditional love. But my parents have given me conditional love. That's what I think. It's love on their terms. As long as I function the way they want me to, it works. Then I get love. (Man, 30+ years)*

This illustrates that within a strong belief system, the importance of obedience and adherence to norms is emphasised. The norms can even take precedence over parents' love for their child. In some cases, it was the disability—being deaf or having an intellectual

disability—that meant exclusion. Cultural norms about deafness could be a boundary for family belonging. A deafblind man with both hearing and deaf siblings expressed:

*I would say I never felt any particular care from him [dad], no interest. He talks to and socialises with his hearing children. So, there is a big status difference within the family, that the hearing talk to each other, rather than [to] us who are deaf. (Man, 35+ years)*

In other cases, it emerged that it was the person's sexuality that had meant exclusion. With sadness in his eyes, a deaf man described the strong heteronormativity that existed in his family.

*That love for someone of the same sex. They [the parents] think automatically and they've always said Adam and Eve. That's what they always go back to, Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, that norm doesn't suit me. I'm more Adam and Steve. (Man, 30+ years)*

The norm of heterosexuality was, in this family, legitimised by religion and connected to the biblical creation story, a story the man had rephrased to fit his own life. Religious traditions have a specific function when it comes to norms for family, gender and sexuality, even if religion itself does not advocate violence (Nason-Clark 2004; Westenberg 2017). The Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism, Islam and Christianity), as patriarchal structures and meaning makers, share certain characteristics that can be linked to honour norms (Björktomta 2019) and also may be used to reinforce and legitimise these norms.

### 5.3.2. The Deaf World—A Greater Scope for Action

While family membership often was described as conditional, for those who came from the deaf community, a path to greater freedom seemed to be possible. The deaf community was described as a separate world to which their hearing parents had no access. It was pictured as giving young people the opportunity to build their own social network on a national level while at the same time being free to try out different ways of thinking and being, in terms of both their social life and their sexuality. Two of the male participants described how they, during their school years away from their families, had been given the opportunity to develop and be the person they wanted to be—a gay man.

*I studied at secondary school up in another town. [...] So, then I had to move away from home. Away from my parents' home. And I got a flat there. It was the first time my parents didn't have control. So, it was a phase and a huge change for me as a person. I underwent a huge, huge transformation. This is me, and I found my true self during this time. (Man, 20+ years)*

*I went to a university for deaf people. [...] And now when I look back on that time, my parents played a big part in my choice. I felt that I really wanted to be free. I didn't want to live at home. I wanted to let go completely and free myself. So, it was abroad, at university. What freedom. Wow. Far, far, far from home. And [my parents] had no idea what I was doing. (Man, 30+ years)*

Also in these quotes, disability interacts with gender and sexuality as well as geographical distance. These male participants from the deaf community described how their disability could, in certain contexts, limit their freedom of action and cause communication difficulties. In other contexts, however, their disability could be an opportunity to expand their scope of action at a distance from their families. The quotes also point to the gendered structures within a context of honour, which mean that men often have greater freedom of action than women (Gill 2008; Björktomta 2012; Baianstovu et al. 2019). Women with hearing impairment in an honour context would probably not have the same opportunities to study elsewhere.

#### 5.4. The Price of Freedom

The participants who now lived a life free from violence reflected on the consequences of leaving their family, their network and their old friends. One woman, who was being examined for PTSD and depression, emphasised a psychological freedom:

*The difference is that I no longer have mental torture or am beaten or pressured or suppressed in what I do. I can be myself here. I was never allowed to be myself around those people [the family]. I always had to live up to how they wanted me to be. (Woman, 30– years)*

However, another woman—who suffered from PTSD and depression due to exposure to violence as well as abduction and attempted forced marriage—emphasised the importance of having the opportunity to tell her story: *“It feels good. This is an important topic. Honour is something everyone needs to know about.”*

Although they had different backgrounds and levels of education, and their various disabilities also meant different needs in terms of support in everyday life, a common story was that leaving their families had not only brought relief. It also meant having to deal with the consequences of a violent childhood. Several of the participants described how fear and threats continued through what in the literature is referred to as post-separation abuse (Spearman et al. 2023; Bjørnholt 2024). A consequence often reported was deteriorating mental health. Here, mainly the women with protected identities expressed a special need for help in processing their experiences of violence and needing support to be able to cope with everyday life. However, all participants described some form of need for professional support. One man had broken with his family when they did not accept his open admission of being homosexual. He described his family as very religious, as fundamentalists who lived according to Christianity in everyday life. At the time of the interview, he was not living with a protected identity. Reflecting on his family, he stated:

*I’m not afraid, worried absolutely, but not afraid. I accept that it is what it is, that my parents are the way they are, I think, for me, my parents are dead, so to speak. They are alive, absolutely. But for me, they are dead, I think, because they are so extremely stubborn and obstinate. (Man, 30+ years)*

While he did not express that he was experiencing any immediate threats of violence, he noticed that shelters primarily were aimed at women. He thus hoped that, if needed, there would be protection available with the possibility of sign language interpretation. It was also obvious that the parents’ strong feelings of shame about his homosexuality had greatly affected him. Breaking with them had caused him to develop mental health problems in such a way that he even had considered suicide: *“I would say that I am mentally broken.”*

##### 5.4.1. Living with a Protected Identity

Six of the ten participants, all women, were living under a protected identity. Their social network consisted of the staff at the sheltered accommodation, foster parents and long-distance boy- or girlfriends. All of them had a new home in another municipality, away from the threats from their families. The women with intellectual disabilities needed both protected identities and an adapted workplace as well as some form of accommodation with support: group homes or serviced housing. Furthermore, all of them had been offered counselling to process their experiences, and some also received psychiatric treatment for PTSD and depression. As research shows, recovering from a childhood with control, restrictions and violence takes time, and having a disability means additional stress (Webster 2022; Madigan et al. 2023). Physical protection can be easier to arrange, but for individuals with intellectual disabilities it can be hard to understand that their mobile phones can be tracked and how to use social media safely.

All of these women described a constant fear that their families would find them. Several had also been detected, as a result of authorities having sent letters to their families with the secret address. In three cases, the families had managed to track down their daughters at their new workplaces or new homes. A woman with intellectual disability described, with fear in her voice, how her criminal family had tracked down her new workplace: “Yes, they found my old job. They came with a gun.”

Five of the participants described criminal family members, which further increased their fear of being found. The threat of being found remained even in cases where family members were outside the country’s borders. The stories highlight an absurdity where the stronger and more dangerous the threats from criminal family members were, the more difficult it seemed to be for the authorities to provide adequate and safe protection. A deaf woman described a catch-22 situation where she had to take full responsibility for her own protection. Due to her special protected identity, she could not use her personal identity number, which is required for digital identification, which in turn is required when contacting authorities as well as healthcare and social services. Furthermore, it is also needed to be able to book a sign language interpreter via videophone.<sup>8</sup>

A deaf woman, who also suffered from PTSD, described that her ex-husband had links to serious, international gang crime and despite the divorce, and despite the fact that her ex-husband was no longer living in Sweden, he still had control over her.

*I have special confidentiality. I live as if I am being hunted. I cannot disclose where I live. I cannot disclose much more. [...] I have no protected accommodation, but I have to solve the situation myself from day to day. [...] I have children, I am a single parent. I am in a forced marriage. [...] I should always keep an eye on the clock. [...] I should report at regular intervals. Just the time. (Woman, 60 years)*

The quote above highlights the difficulties of being in a forced relationship in an honour context and the risk of an escalation if you try to break it off. The woman’s disability became an additional vulnerability and made it even more difficult for her to get help and support. During the interview, she described that the only support she had received was from the National Women’s Shelter and Sign Language Support.

#### 5.4.2. Collective and Transnational Norms of Honour

The collective dimension meant that the norms of the honour context could also be transnational. The families in these stories prioritise norms regarding heterosexuality, marriage and female chastity over disability and gender. Threats of violence could thus occur even after a breakup and could come from parents and siblings, but also from relatives, both in Sweden and abroad. Through social media, relatives on the other side of the globe could follow and control what the participants were doing in Sweden.

A deaf woman, who also had ADHD, described receiving serious death threats from relatives in her country of origin. She came from a secular family and had support from her parents; however, this was not enough when the threats came from a large Muslim family with a strong sense of honour, where several relatives also had a history of violence. She described her strategy for protecting herself:

*I wrote everything that happened in detail in a public post on Facebook. I wrote that if I die, if something happens to me, then this person, this person, this person and this person are responsible. And after that, they just left me alone and left my whole family alone. [...] If anything happened, the evidence is here on Facebook. The police don’t even need to dig into this any further than going on my Facebook. And it was a public post for the whole world to see; this has just happened. (Woman, 30+ years)*

The quote highlights how social media can be used to build protection for individuals, but at the same time how it also can contribute to the transnational dimension of honour-based

violence. There were several accounts reflecting how the collective dimension can affect others in the family. Two of the men described how they still always conduct a risk analysis before posting anything that could be linked to the rainbow community or about Pride on social media. After posting a picture on his Facebook page, one of them got an immediate reaction from his brother-in-law.

*A picture of me and my partner. And my sister's husband asked me the question directly. He came and asked me the question. What's going on? Yes, I have a partner. But you have to leave your partner, otherwise we will see your family as a dirty family and then I will divorce your sister. And your sister's children. They have children together. The man's family would not accept that he is married to a woman, to my sister, who has such a family. So, you can see as far as possible. These tentacles, these appendages. (Man, 20+ years)*

The codes of honour extended across national borders regardless of whether the families were Christian or Muslim, and the stories were almost the same. If their relatives found out about someone being gay or that a woman posted “immoral images” on social media, it would affect not only them but also their parents and siblings. All would be excluded from the larger family community, their social network, and the parents would not be invited to weddings and other celebrations. The conditional belonging was a reality also for parents and siblings, and the strong normative systems left their mark on the older generation as well.

## 6. Discussion

The results of this interview study illustrate the complex network of vulnerability that intersecting identities can create at the individual level and the subsequent difficulties one may experience in obtaining help and ultimately feeling safe. When examining participants' experiences of an honour context from an intersectional perspective, different relationships, dimensions and aspects of power, discrimination, oppression and dominance become visible in what can be described as multiple layers. These layers encompass varying degrees of power, and based on gender and religion, the norm of virginity was most significant for women. For men, the norm of heterosexuality was central. For both women and men, the norm of heterosexual marriage was strong, and the findings indicate how the degree of religiosity (regardless of religion) can interact with the norm of heterosexuality as the only—and the correct—option, taking precedence over both gender and disability.

The results reveal how honour norms interact with other dimensions and can reinforce participants' vulnerability to control and violence. It also becomes clear how cultural perceptions can shape the experience of disability and, in addition, increase vulnerability to violence depending on how culture, gender, religion and disability interact. Having an intellectual disability, for example, might involve cognitive difficulties that can further increase vulnerability. Being deaf or deafblind could mean having a lower status in some families, as the norm of hearing and verbal communication was strong. It could also pose a risk of forced marriage.

An important finding concerns the experiences of conditional belonging. On a general level, belonging was perceived to be conditioned upon being ‘normal’ and being ‘right’, which implies that, for example, disability, homosexuality, bisexuality or a loss of virginity could lead to emotional neglect (withheld parental love), exposure to violence, and even exclusion from the family community. Growing up in an honour context, with layers of adverse childhood experiences (Webster 2022; Madigan et al. 2023) including limited freedom of action and little opportunity to develop one's own will, had led to severe problems for these interviewees. All of them had developed various forms of mental health

issues, some of which were so severe that they caused functional impairment and even thoughts of suicide.

However, there were also more positive stories, showing that disability could be not only a source of vulnerability but also an avenue to freedom. While the participants with deafness and deaf blindness described communication problems within the family affecting both the parent–child relationship and their own opportunities for development, paradoxically, the disability also seemed to be an opportunity to enter the world of the deaf community, where they were equal and were given a sense of belonging. Living away from home meant that parents and siblings did not have the same opportunities to control them. However, in these cases, gender must also be taken into account, as women generally have less freedom of action in an honour context (Gill 2008; Björktomt 2012).

To conclude, this study has shown how multiple layers of vulnerability in an intersecting way affect individuals' lives during childhood as well as adulthood, negatively impacting their social, emotional, physical and economic well-being. In connection with the stories of conditional belonging, emotional neglect needs special attention, since studies show that emotional neglect during childhood has specific pathways to later mental health problems (Chen et al. 2025). The results highlight the need of society to be able to detect signs of coercion, control and violence at an early stage and to act on them. Based on dependence and invisibility, important areas for preventive work are key services and services with compulsory attendance—such as antenatal clinics, child welfare centres, preschools, schools, and services that provide support and assistance to children and adults with disabilities. Considering powerlessness, practical work needs to be developed at different levels of society building on individual needs and taking an approach that is victim-centred (Gill and Anitha 2025) and characterised by cultural sensitivity.

General programmes for parents of both younger children and teenagers should be offered where knowledge about the societal system is conveyed and where parents' experiences and cultural backgrounds are taken seriously (Osman et al. 2016, 2021). Moreover, public health interventions and parenting training addressing emotional neglect are also important to develop (Chen et al. 2025). In addition, stays in sheltered accommodation need to be further developed, including preparations for a secure future, based on different disabilities and specific needs. Although the results of this study cannot be generalised to a wider context, the intersectional perspective provides insight into the complexity that characterises the participants' contexts. Honour-based violence as a phenomenon operates at the individual level, the family and group level, and also at the structural level—both nationally and globally. The findings call for more research about how different disabilities can impact one's situation and interact with other dimensions in a rigid system of meaning such as that found in an honour context, including adverse childhood experiences.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (protocol code approval no. 2024-00404-01, approved on 11 April 2024).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. An illustrated information sheet was used to help people with disabilities understand the implications of participating and their right to withdraw from the study without consequences.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to legal restrictions by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Other related laws include: Child marriage and forced marriage (chap. 4, sct. 4c, [Penal Code 1962](#)), Law on prohibiting female genital mutilation and virginity tests on women ([Act 1982](#)) and Travel ban under the Law on Care of Young Persons ([Act 1990](#)).
- <sup>2</sup> The deaf world (or deaf community) is a term used to describe the culture, community and identity that exists among deaf people, especially those who use sign language as their first language.
- <sup>3</sup> Sign language interpretation: The interpreter simultaneously interprets what is said in sign language and spoken Swedish. Interpreters often work in pairs and take turns approximately every 15 to 30 min, depending on how demanding the interpretation is. Tactile sign language interpretation: The interpreter interprets from spoken language or visual sign language into tactile sign language, which means, among other things, that the person with deaf blindness reads the sign language via the interpreter's hands ([Swedish Agency for Participation 2024](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> It was not until 1981 that sign language was recognised as the first language of deaf people in Sweden. Today, it is the common language within the deaf community and used in direct communication in the same way that hearing people use spoken language. In Sweden, parents are given the opportunity to learn sign language, but this support is voluntary ([Swedish National Agency for Special Education 2024](#)). There are also opportunities for having cochlear implants fitted. A cochlear implant uses electrical stimulation to replace the function of the inner ear (cochlea).
- <sup>5</sup> Swedish sign language differs both from other national sign languages and from spoken Swedish. It is an independent language system with its own lexicon and grammar ([SOU 2022](#)). Although there is no uniform international sign language and the language varies from country to country, the [World Federation of the Deaf \(2024\)](#) describes how “deaf communities share sign language, a common heritage, and identify themselves as members of a cultural and linguistic minority”.
- <sup>6</sup> Culture is here understood as values, norms, customs and traditions in interaction with legislation and religion. It is a dynamic phenomenon that shifts and occurs at different levels and also changes over time. It is not necessarily related to ethnicity or national borders.
- <sup>7</sup> In Swedish policy, female genital mutilation is currently placed under gender equality work and honour-based violence ([Palm 2024](#)). However, genital mutilation can also occur outside of an honour context ([National Centre Against Honour-Based Violence and Oppression 2025](#)).
- <sup>8</sup> The responsibility for everyday interpreting for people who are deaf, deafblind, deafened in adulthood, hard of hearing or who have speech difficulties lies with the regions ([SOU 2022](#)), i.e., healthcare. When deaf people need a sign language interpreter in their contacts with authorities, they first need to call via an interpreting service; it is not possible to order a sign language interpreter via text message. Using a phone with a camera and screen, the person calls an interpreting service, with which they have video contact. The interpreting service then calls the authority. The interpreting service translates what the person signs on the screen to the authority representative who receives the call.

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