
3-4-2023

Torn Between the Real Me and the Social Me: Educated Women's Perspectives of Surviving Marital Abuse

Mayada A. Daibes

Philadelphia University, Jordan, mdaibes@philadelphia.edu.jo

Reema R. Safadi

The University of Jordan, r.safadi@ju.edu.jo

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Recommended APA Citation

Daibes, M. A., & Safadi, R. R. (2023). Torn Between the Real Me and the Social Me: Educated Women's Perspectives of Surviving Marital Abuse. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(3), 661-676. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5692>

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Abstract

The perspectives of educated women on surviving abusive marital relationships have not been adequately explored, thus implying a gap in the literature regarding the role of education in enhancing or mitigating the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV). In this context, the question is how do educated women perceive surviving abusive relationships? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), using flexible semi-structured face-to-face interviews, was conducted to understand the experiences of eight highly educated women (master's, Ph.D.) in abusive marriage. Four superordinate interrelated themes were developed: (a) developing an awareness of self-respect generating role confusion, (b) being torn between traditions and ambitions, (c) normalizing abuse as part of marriage, and (d) challenging abuse by self-promotion. Like other survivors of abuse, educated women tried to justify, blame themselves, work harder to please the perpetrator, and promote themselves; finally, they continued to live their lives by embracing abuse to bring peace and save their marriage. The effect of sociocultural context on educated women's perspectives seems to play a crucial role in women's decisions to stay in abusive relationships, despite the assumptions of empowerment and independence.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, education, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, women, Jordan

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Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the women who shared with us their private life experiences.

Torn Between the Real Me and the Social Me: Educated Women's Perspectives of Surviving Marital Abuse

Mayada A. Daibes¹ and Reema R. Safadi²

¹Philadelphia University, Jordan

²The University of Jordan

The perspectives of educated women on surviving abusive marital relationships have not been adequately explored, thus implying a gap in the literature regarding the role of education in enhancing or mitigating the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV). In this context, the question is how do educated women perceive surviving abusive relationships? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), using flexible semi-structured face-to-face interviews, was conducted to understand the experiences of eight highly educated women (master's, Ph.D.) in abusive marriage. Four superordinate interrelated themes were developed: (a) developing an awareness of self-respect generating role confusion, (b) being torn between traditions and ambitions, (c) normalizing abuse as part of marriage, and (d) challenging abuse by self-promotion. Like other survivors of abuse, educated women tried to justify, blame themselves, work harder to please the perpetrator, and promote themselves; finally, they continued to live their lives by embracing abuse to bring peace and save their marriage. The effect of sociocultural context on educated women's perspectives seems to play a crucial role in women's decisions to stay in abusive relationships, despite the assumptions of empowerment and independence.

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Introduction

A large body of literature is devoted to exploring and examining intimate partner violence (IPV). Numerous research studies have looked into its causes, including the demographic characteristics of survivors and perpetrators, the sociocultural factors, and backgrounds that contribute to its prevalence (Capaldi et al., 2012; Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Marshall & Furr, 2010; Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015), and the effects on women, children, families, societies, and the economy as a whole (Morse et al., 2012; Safadi et al., 2018). Women's educational level was one of the most prevalent factors across various studies, confirming its considerable association with IPV (Abo-Elfetoh, 2015; Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Kreager et al., 2013; Vakili et al., 2010). Women's education appears to strengthen their connection with their spouses in marriage and weaken abusive marital relationships (Kreager et al., 2013). Thus, some studies have concluded that empowering women through education or work protects them from IPV (Abo-Elfetoh, 2015; Vakili et al., 2010; Vyas & Watts, 2009). A few research studies, however, contradicted the negative association between educational level and marital violence (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Marium, 2014). A qualitative study conducted in rural Bangladesh by Marium (2014) found that a high level of education had no

protective effect against abuse. On the contrary, regardless of educational development, attaining a higher level of education may escalate violence against women (Marium, 2014).

However, in the question of why women stay in an abusive relationship, several studies have explored the effect of educational level on women's decision-making (Amin et al., 1997; Babu & Kar, 2009; Slabbert, 2017; Uthman et al., 2009; Wahed & Bhuiya, 2007). Kreager et al. (2013) examined the characteristics influencing a woman's decision to stay in an abusive relationship and found that educated and financially secure women were less likely to stay in abusive relationships. In contrast, women who were less educated, unemployed, and had never had any help or counseling were chronically abused in marital partnerships (Follingstad & Rogers, 2012; Lenze & Klasen, 2017; Swadely, 2017; Zink et al., 2003). The published literature found that poverty, lack of financial independence (Slabbert, 2017), and fear of public shame (Hu et al., 2021) were common reasons for uneducated women to remain in abusive marriages or to avoid seeking help.

In line with this argument about the association of women's education with IPV, Marium (2014) concluded that when analyzing the risk of violence against women, it is pertinent to consider various other aspects besides women's education and literacy levels. In disagreement with the results of the above-mentioned studies about the negative relationship between IPV and education, Marium (2014) emphasized the crucial need to investigate sociocultural factors and contexts alongside women's educational levels, especially given that educated women are exposed to more violence as men strive to compensate for the loss of their traditional authority. In agreement with Macmillan and Gartner (1999), Marium (2014) stated that educated women will continue to endure more violence if marriage relationships are socially and culturally mandated by gender norms and the absence of women's independence.

Whether educational level plays a strong or weak role in protecting women against IPV, educated women's perspectives on surviving abusive marital relationships have not been adequately explored, thus implying a gap in the literature regarding the role of education in enhancing or mitigating the prevalence of IPV. Within this standpoint and debates about the association between education and IPV, it is worth noting that a considerable worldwide transformation in women's pursuit of higher education and career attainment has occurred over the last few decades. Women currently outnumber men at universities in countries such as Panama, Sri Lanka, Cuba, Brunei, and Argentina, demonstrating the highest female-to-male ratios in the world (World Economic Forum, 2020). According to Jordan's Department of Statistics, 93% of the total female population is literate (2018). Of these, 45% have completed high school and higher education, 19% have a bachelor's or postgraduate degree, and no more than 2% have master's or doctorate degrees (Jordan Department of Statistics, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to uncover this association by understanding educated women's perspectives on surviving abusive relationships.

This study is significant for women with higher education who have been living in abusive relationships in general and, more specifically, for women who live in traditional communities where conventional views of women's roles prevail. By understanding their experiences of living in and enduring IPV, we aim to reveal the social structures and mechanisms that mandate women with higher education to stay in abusive marital relationships. By understanding their perspectives on abuse, we can invest in and use the power of education in developing policies that invoke women's empowerment and social change.

Researchers' Contextual Reflexivity

The authors of this paper are two women with a Ph.D. degree who work in two academic institutions as educators and researchers. We have relatively long experience in conducting qualitative research that is focused on culturally based gender issues. We are

engaged with the community of this study (educated women in academia and the community) and have a strong and long working relationship with working women, academics in our institutions, and other working women in the community. Our formal contact with educated women in the community conveyed a covert message that highly educated women seem to be empowered and financially independent. However, during the informal side conversations that take place daily with close academic friends, this reality seems to have another face—a face that exposed itself during a side conversation with some participating women in a workshop about the reality of feminism in Arab countries and the role that educated women may play in the feminist movement. Upon this event, the authors wondered about the extent to which educated women can contribute to social change if they themselves experience abuse. In this regard, the researchers raised the following research question: How do educated women who play independent roles outside their homes deal with violence, if any, inside their homes in a traditional community?

Positionality

We, the authors of this study, are two educated academicians who have the advantage of situated positionality. According to Thomas (2017), this position affects the nature of our observations and interpretations of our participants' lives. To some extent, we are part of this community—highly educated women in Jordan—and have been interacting with the community of working women in academia and other institutions that employ women in different hierarchical levels of expertise. In this study, and because of the advantages we have based on our situated position, and our close interactions with colleagues, we think that we are serving our needs as well as that of the majority of working women who are suffering abusive relationships in silence.

In this study, we played both insider and outsider roles. As insiders, the fact that we are “women” living in the same society and work contexts, we are granted the privilege of accessing the participants' lives in a smooth manner. As outsiders and gender-sensitive researchers, this has created an awareness that has enabled us to perceive and interpret women's experiences from a wider lens.

Method

Study Design

This study included qualitative research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA was employed to understand the meanings and interpretations of highly educated women's perspectives on surviving abusive marriages. The purpose of IPA is to produce a contextual in-depth analysis of how participants make sense of their personal and social constructions of specific interactions and events in their life worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Smith and Osborn (2003) explained that the primary goal of an IPA study is the meanings that specific experiences, events, and states hold for participants. The approach is phenomenological in the sense that it involves a thorough examination of a participant's lifeworld; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event rather than an objective statement of the object or event itself.

The IPA design enabled us to construct the participants' perspectives as truthfully as they were voiced. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), IPA is an iterative process in which the researcher is an active participant. It is a two-stage interpretation process, also known as double hermeneutics. As the participants attempt to make sense of their surroundings, the

researchers attempt to make sense of the participants' attempts to make sense of their surroundings. That is why, according to Packer and Addison (1989) and Palmer (1969), IPA is intellectually linked to hermeneutics and interpretation theories.

In brief, IPA was selected as a research approach because it is most suited for interpreting how people view the specific circumstances they encounter (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this study, we aim to understand how highly educated women perceive their living in abusive marriages.

Study Settings

This study was conducted in Jordan, a Middle Eastern country with a population of approximately 11 million people (Jordan Department of Statistics, 2023). The Jordanian society is an Arab society with a deeply ingrained male-dominant ideology (El Azhary Sonbol, 2003). In such traditional societies, marital relationships are dominated by socially and culturally prescribed gender roles (Macmillan & Gartner, 1999). Fathers and men have complete control over the family, particularly women's and children's decisions and behaviors (Barakat, 1993). According to Arab culture, in an institution of marriage, a husband is culturally considered central to the family structure, and a woman's education or work is a threat to that centrality (Lenze & Klasen, 2017). Although some Jordanians' perspectives reflect the transition to modernity, a considerable proportion of the population still clings to traditions and tribal rules (Safadi, 2005).

Sample and Recruitment Procedures

Eight highly educated women were selected through the purposeful selection method from a non-governmental association concerned with women's development and empowerment in Jordan. The selected participants were between 31 and 46 years old, lived in urban (60%) and rural areas (40%), were employed, married with a marriage duration between 6 and 21 years, and held Ph.D. ($n = 6$) or master's degrees ($n = 2$). Half of the participants ($n = 5$) studied in Jordan, and the rest studied abroad.

The association's general assembly has 120 members, 89% of whom are women who are highly educated and hold various academic, governmental, and non-governmental positions. The association's manager facilitated our access to its members by approaching the volunteers virtually to participate in a study about highly educated women's perspectives on living in abusive marriages. Out of the 120 members, only 14 women responded to the invitation. A second email was sent to the 14 women, inviting them to a phone call at their convenience. Thirteen women responded with phone numbers and times that worked for them; accordingly, another email was sent to confirm the phone call time. During the first interaction, eight out of the 13 women verbally expressed experiencing an abusive marital relationship and, therefore, were included in this study; these women met the inclusion criteria for their level of education (master's or Ph.D.) and consented to participate.

Data Collection

Flexible semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted by the principal investigator (MD) between October 2019 and March 2020. Interviews were conducted according to the participants' choice of place (office, workplace, or home) and time. Each participant was interviewed twice over a period of four weeks. The first interview was designed to break the ice and establish rapport, while the second was designed to capture the experience through an in-depth, extended dialogue. The duration of the interviews was between 90 minutes

and two hours. A planned topic guide was developed based on the researchers' experiences. This guide included questions about (1) women's perceived meanings of marital abuse, (2) their own experiences of spousal abuse, and (3) their reasons for staying in marital abusive relationships. Prompts were used to clarify, probe, and elaborate on the events with examples. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim immediately after the interview.

Ethical Considerations

The research project was submitted to the [Anonymous] Institutional Review Board. Upon approval, the selection process began by sending emails to the assembly members ($n = 120$), with information explaining the purpose and procedures of the study. This process ended when eight women met the criteria and expressed an interest in being interviewed. The eight women were then sent emails containing the consent form and given several days before the first face-to-face interview. The women's rights to voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time during the study without subsequent consequences were explicitly stated in the information letter. In addition, all participants' transcripts were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, and digital recordings were kept in a locked cabinet to which only the principal investigator had access. Other than giving pseudonyms, measures were used to maintain the anonymity of women, namely writing only the characteristics that put the reader in the context (i.e., university degree [masters or Ph.D.], years of marriage in interval form rather than specific number of years of marriage, region of study [national or international], and residence area [urban or rural]). The selection of one organization out of 103 civil societal organizations that are scattered around Jordan makes it arduous to locate or identify participants' identities (Phenix Center, 2023)

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo (Version 11; QSR International, 2022). The analysis was based on Smith and Osborn's (2003) techniques, described as follows: (a) the researchers (MD) and (RS) read and re-read the accounts and discussed the initial codes together until reaching a consensus, (b) introductory notes were translated into more concise terms, (c) text was condensed into clusters to capture the essence of the experience, (d) each cluster of terms has a descriptive superior theme label that expressed the cluster's conceptual nature, and I a matrix was generated with illustrious data excerpts for each theme. Themes were developed after each researcher read the transcripts independently, made notes and questions, and then compared them with each other. An example of the transcripts and the analysis stages and themes extraction were given to an independent colleague who is an expert on the qualitative analysis methods and gave her approval of our analysis outcome.

Regarding the translation process, the initial codes developed by the researchers were translated from Arabic to English by a bilingual professional translator. Then, these codes were back translated by a second translator to confirm that the meaning was unchanged.

Rigor

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were used to ensure qualitative trustworthiness. Credibility, which is confidence in the truth of the data, was assured by the prolonged engagement of the researchers with women and the specific nature of research and fieldwork undertaken. We are part of the academic fraternity, share the women's sociocultural background, and have extensive experience in researching women surviving abusive

relationships. Although there can be no dependability without credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), dependability was established by an independent expert (a research colleague) in qualitative methods and analysis to review the process of this study's data collection and analysis. A consensus was reached on most of the debated codes and themes presented in this paper. In support of confirmability, the researchers were constantly aware of their personal biases, as they referred to their reflective commentaries on each interview and its analysis (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, although the researchers were involved in a double-hermeneutic interpretation of our positions as insiders and outsiders, some intensive measures were followed to keep the participants' narratives as free as possible from our personal biases. For example, at the beginning of each interview, we checked the reflexivity list about marital abuse, avoided interruptions and giving advice, and adhered to silence on almost all occasions where a debatable issue emerged during the interview, unless they were necessary to keep the interview running. To establish transferability, the researchers provided thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the recruitment process, the context of the research, interviews, data collection and analysis methods, and detailed excerpts of women's accounts for other researchers to assess the suitability of the study's findings to their contexts.

Findings

The study findings illustrate the perceptions of eight highly educated women living in abusive marriages. Four superordinate interrelated themes are constructed: (a) developing an awareness of self-respect generating role confusion, (b) being torn between traditions and ambitions, (c) normalizing abuse as a part of marriage, and (d) challenging abuse by self-promotion.

Developing an Awareness of Self-Respect Generating Role Confusion

We will begin with a thorough analysis of a passage from one participant, Ronza (Ph.D., 16–18 years of marriage, studied abroad, and lives in an urban area). Although each instance has its unique flavor, this passage highlights an inclusive view of all the key types and characteristics that appear in other participants' accounts. Therefore, the effect of the passage cumulatively illustrates a vivid picture of the core idea of this paper:

During my graduate studies, he [husband] used to blame me during Skype calls for postponing having children until I finished my studies. He used derogatory language and accused me of having affairs while abroad. At that time, I decided to file for divorce as soon as I returned to Jordan; the humiliation was unbearable. When I returned home... I reconsidered this decision and was convinced, or probably convinced myself, that he loved me and was jealous.

Men blame an educated wife for everything, as if a university degree is the root of all the problems. It hurts me a lot when he intentionally destroys my favorite kitchen plants, breaks dishes and glasses when angry, attempting to hurt me.

He likes to do everything that hurts me... including purposely smearing or making a mess of the bathroom or any other location I've cleaned. In one incident, I screamed and urged him to be more organized around the house. He responded that he would not change and that it was my duty to clean up after him. I still remember him saying, "You are a maid regardless of what you become."

Ronza begins by stating that she was routinely subjected to psychological, verbal, and emotional abuse before and during the years of her college. This could be due to her husband's belief that a woman's education poses a threat to his conventional macho authority and power and that a woman's role is restricted to housekeeping regardless of her level of education.

What stands out in Ronza's narrative is that she was determined to leave him while she was abroad, but her decision changed once she returned home. One interpretation is that the social context, which includes close relatives and family, as well as the general social surroundings, has an impact on spatially fixing the broken marriage, which eventually influences her decision. Not only was her decision to stay or leave affected by the surrounding cultural views, but she also subconsciously substituted those thoughts with love and affection. Such a reaction might be interpreted as self-defense to protect herself from being publicly stigmatized as a divorcee.

The next passage from Sara (master's degree [M.A.], 4–6 years of marriage, studied nationally, and lives in an urban area) explicitly demonstrates a similar interpretation by replacing feelings of abuse and hesitance with feelings of love and affection:

At the start of my marriage, there were numerous reasons for me to stay: financial difficulties, unemployment, and possibly dread of people gloating over my divorce and being labeled a divorcee. Later, after I achieved success in my profession, I reconsidered separation, but I was unable to make that decision. Not because I got accustomed to this way of life, but because I adore him.

However, what if they choose to stay? How can we tell the difference between a decision made from genuine love and affection and one made from internalizing abuse in the name of love? The preceding sections demonstrate considerable recognition and thorough consideration of being abused and the decision to stay. In another example of a decision to stay in an abusive relationship, Faten (M.A., 10–12 years of marriage, studied nationally, and lives in a rural area) reported that her decision was entirely based on rational thinking:

When I tell a close friend about my abusive husband's behavior, she tells me that I am stupid and that I should leave him. But when I'm alone and check my earnings, my financial condition, and my work, I feel powerful and know that nothing but my love for him drives my decision to stay in this marriage. When I recall the wonderful days and tranquil times we had, I reckon that I don't want to lose him, but I must change him.

According to the data matrix, women who stayed in an abusive marriage due to an assumed affection for the spouse also normalized abuse in the marriage. With this finding, we believe that women who have developed "assumed" affection toward their abusive spouses may have evolved self-limiting behaviors to bring some balance into their lives by maintaining the husband's pride and avoiding the subsequent incremental fury due to jealousy of the wife's growing achievement. Ronza articulates this notion eloquently as having two selves or identities: a "docile" and a "real me":

When I sit down to work on my laptop, my husband's demands escalate, requiring immediate fulfillment of his requests. He knows that I can't work without at least one uninterrupted hour, so he purposively disrupts my work. My time is taken up mostly by housework and his demands. I do my best to

accommodate his needs to avoid being blamed or accused of putting him second to my work.

Jenan (Ph.D., 10–12 years of marriage, studied nationally, and lives in an urban area) typically represents all participants who felt uncertainty due to their two selves in the following passage:

Our differences intensified after obtaining a Ph.D. He does not hurt me, but I feel he tries to humiliate me on numerous occasions, including when we make love... That's why I try to avoid him as much as possible. Sometimes I'm confused, I strive to be the woman he wants me to be, I mean to do [those] things without limits, but what he wants from me doesn't match the real me... Of course, this is tremendously stressful because I feel torn.

When Jenan was asked about her sex life before having her doctorate, she said:

I don't recall ever categorizing sex as "mannerly" or "not mannerly." It never occurred to me that sexual practices could be either respectful or disrespectful of a woman's feelings. Unintentionally, I began to experience this later in my life, after I completed my education, I believe.

Torn Between Traditions and Ambitions

Unlike Ronza, Sara, and Faten, who have normalized abuse in marriage and related it to love and affection toward their spouse, women in this new theme perceived staying in marriage as a hardship and a challenge to be surmounted or as a motive for personal development. The espoused challenging sensation is relevant to their fear of being blamed for marriage failure; hence, it underpins the decision to stay in an abusive relationship. The next passage of Asma (Ph.D., 13–15 years of marriage, studied abroad, and lives in an urban area) demonstrates this perception:

It is pointless for me to excel in my career while failing in my marriage... Regardless of a woman's qualifications, it is evident that society has no mercy for divorced women. Society, in my opinion, is harsher on educated women than on uneducated women since they are held responsible for marital failure. She is accused of being too busy or neglectful of her husband's needs, as well as for being haughty because she is educated or a professor... I don't want to be blamed for my marriage's demise and labeled a failure. Perhaps if I live in a society that does not judge divorcees, I would have filed for a divorce a long time ago; at the very least, I would have kept my respect for myself and lived as Asma "the professor," rather than what is expected of me.

Asma is more concerned with being viewed as a failure in marriage than with failing that marriage. Asma, like the previous participants, has two selves: the first self as "Asma" who lives and acts according to societal expectations as a traditional wife, making every possible effort to keep a fake solid marriage despite the abuse, and the second self as "the real Asma" embedding the educated woman who, deep down, is not concerned about failing marriages but wants to live her dream of being a respected professor without restrictions. We believe that the latter "self" represents Asma's true self, free of societal constraints.

Normalizing Abuse as Part of Marriage

While it is commonly assumed that marriage has its “ups” and “downs,” some participants believed that the “downs” of marital life occur when they are abused. They saw marital conflicts as a normal part of the process. Marriage, they believed, was never linear, as shown in the following passage by Ibtisam (Ph.D., 19–21 years of marriage, studied nationally, and lives in an urban area):

After [19–21] years of marriage, I realized that my life with him will never be straightforward, but rather a series of conflicts, sometimes I win and sometimes he does; something I was not aware of at the start of my marriage. I feel that not every day is tranquil, because any shared life is never monotonous...but life goes on.

Ibtisam’s marriage has lasted 19–21 years, making it the longest of all study participants. Ibtisam has accepted and normalized abuse throughout her long marriage. She became docile to avoid additional disputes with her spouse. Ibtisam declared that at the start of her marriage, she believed in the linearity of marriage, a belief that changed over the 21 years of marriage. Sameera (Ph.D., 19–21 years of marriage, studied nationally, and lives in a rural area) is another participant who described the abuse as a normal aspect of her marriage:

There is no excuse for abusive behavior toward women, but my experience has taught me that requesting a divorce after every minor argument is pointless. The man will come to his sense sooner or later, and I am preoccupied with so many other things that I simply ignore him... except for a few, all married women have encountered abuse in their marriage, not necessarily physically, but possibly verbally. If every woman left her marriage because she was abused, Jordan would be devoid of married couples.

Challenging Abuse by Self-Promotion

Some participants saw abuse as a motivator for development. Women stated that their husband’s aggressive behaviors fueled their determination to promote themselves. Abuse motivated some participants, such as Shaza (Ph.D., 7-9 years of marriage, studied abroad, lives in an urban area), to abandon her comfort zone to secure a safe escape in the event of a divorce:

Every accomplishment in my life has resulted from a disagreement with my husband. He barred me from working while I was pursuing my master’s degree, so I began browsing for online scholarships until I found one and got accepted. I traveled to the United States after a big fight. When I returned to Jordan after finishing my Ph.D., he went violent and left home for two months. During this time, I applied for a loan and bought a property. When he left the second time following a fight, I bought a new car. On peaceful days, believe it or not, I am less pushy, and less persistent, and I avoid upsetting him. When he provokes a fight, hits me, and then leaves the house, I feel liberated with a solid excuse to do anything I want.

In Shaza’s situation, the “real me” is repressed in her husband’s company. Shaza’s reaction to fighting inspired her to pursue her goals. As she stated, this legitimizes her actions when he is away. Shaza lives a different life when she is with her husband than when she is

not. In his presence, she is meek, but in his absence, especially following a dispute, she takes the initiative and becomes determined to attain her goals. Shaza sought legitimacy to purchase a home, a car, and a ranch for herself. We presume that Shaza did not want to show him that she is financially better than him, has more property than he does, or feels superior to him; rather, she wanted to secure herself. Shaza's sense of instability drove her to try various methods of achieving financial security. Aside from that, Shaza remained in the marriage and avoided the societal shame of divorce, which she claimed ensured her balanced life.

In a similar example, Jenan clearly stated that abuse has a role in motivating women to secure a safe exit in the case of divorce:

Did you hear the popular Jordanian proverb that says: Fire creates gold! He [husband] was the fire, and I was the gold. I am not the same person I was in my parent's home... when I got married, and after several instances of abuse and nuisances, I insisted on working... Without his knowledge, I enrolled myself in a master's degree program at a university, and later in a doctorate program at the same university. For more than five years, I studied without him knowing because I realized, thankfully early on in my marriage life, that I needed to be stronger by collecting more weapons to protect myself and my children in case he decided to leave us permanently; I wanted to protect my children from the fake societal empathy... Divorce is not a choice; society is so mean to divorced women.

The four themes and the provided excerpts reflect a diversity of responses and perspectives of educated women experiencing marital abuse. This variation in the responses gives evidence of the multiple realities of surviving abuse embodying awareness of self-respect, confusion between tradition and ambition, normalizing abuse, and challenging abuse through self-promotion.

Discussion

This study offers an emic viewpoint on educated women who live in and choose to stay in abusive marriages. Using IPA, we aimed to answer the following research question: How do educated women perceive surviving abusive marital relationships? Four themes were developed, highlighting the multiplicities of the perspectives and responses of highly educated women to intimate partner abuse. Despite their different perspectives, all the participants made the same decision: to stay rather than quit an abusive relationship. The four notions—developing an awareness of self-respect that generated role confusion, being self-torn between traditions and ambitions, normalizing abuse, and challenging abuse by self-promotion—reflect the participants' perspectives of surviving abusive marital relationships that will be employed as a guide to this discussion.

Traditional societies are characterized by gender role distribution (Barakat, 1993). Women's duties are limited to family or household responsibilities that are regarded as critical to preserving cultural and national identity (Estrellado & Loh, 2014; Hayati et al., 2013; Tariq & Ismail, 2013). Power, authority, and control are inherent in traditional views of masculinity. Women who adhere to traditional gender roles often accept power disparities and submit to men. In Jordan, an example of a traditional society is that women are expected to meet the cultural expectations of housewives' responsibilities and reproduction, and having to work outside their home does not relieve them from their domestic and reproductive responsibilities. This societal view of women's main domestic roles contrasts with the expectations of a career

woman who must maintain a role and move up the ladder status in the workforce (Morse et al., 2012).

The educated women in this study refused to accept the conventional role as the sole one. With their education and increased self-awareness, educated women have developed a new self with a new perspective: the role of a career woman. This has produced confusion and a sense of being torn between the traditional docile “social self” and the ambitious “career self,” putting them at a higher risk of violence. Women who defied gender boundaries in traditional societies by acquiring greater education or better occupations than their husbands were accused of displacing and undermining them as breadwinners, depriving them of manly pride, and increasing the likelihood of more violence (Lenze & Klasen, 2017; Morse et al., 2012). These findings are consistent with Tshifhumulo and Mudhovozi (2013) and Dockterman (2014), who reported that women who stand up for their rights and try to confront their perpetrators are often met with more controlling and abusive behavior and fall back to be submissive and docile to stay safe and avoid abuse.

Educated women choose to be socially submissive, creating a docile “social me” rather than leaving or filing for divorce to avoid abuse and social stigma (Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Lenze & Klasen, 2017). According to Lenze and Klasen (2017), women in Jordan do not have appealing external alternatives, as evidenced by the quite low divorce rate (6% in 2019; Jordan Department of Statistics, 2022). The social system discourages divorce because separation is accompanied by significant social stigma and economic distress.

In this study, the “social self” was further enforced by the fear of being socially viewed as a “failure” in the case of marriage failure, a finding supported by Henderson et al. (1997), who reported that women may blame themselves for the failure of their relationships if they are divorced. The unwelcome “social me” represents components that are antithetical to educated women’s desired self, or “the real me”—the self that provides fulfillment in their new realities as worthy career women with higher educational degrees and power. The inconsistency of the two selves’ components created ambiguity that engendered constant discomfort and suffering for them. This sensation was eloquently described as “being torn” between “two selves.” We assume that the new “real self” emerged alongside the development of self-awareness throughout their high school journey—an awareness that may have surfaced while studying abroad by comparing their status to the status of women in contemporary societies (i.e., the United States and the United Kingdom) but was quickly suppressed when they returned home. It was obvious that obtaining a Ph.D. or a master’s degree from a foreign country had a substantial impact on the participants’ marriages, as well as their awareness and impressions of their new identities. That is, they became aware of their newly formed self’s incompatibility with societal expectations, which are primarily gendered and divided. Several studies conducted in Pakistan (Kamal & Pervaiz, 2012; Sathar, 1984), India (Borkotoky & Unisa, 2015; Nag & Singhal, 2013), and Bangladesh (Bates et al., 2007) found that women with higher education are less compatible with traditional expectations. Educated women marry later, want fewer children, and bear fewer births—a task that, in our study terms, the social self must accept but the highly educated career “real me” does not conform with.

Numerous studies have stressed the importance of empowering women against violence through education (Al-Badayneh, 2012). Women’s education and employment are the best investments in empowering women, making them feel safe at home and in the community and protecting them from abuse (Al-Badayneh, 2012). Many studies have reported that the acceptance of violence is negatively related to the level of education of women. For example, Lund and Dodd (2003) reported that the level of spousal abuse that women are capable of enduring is often determined by the duration of the relationship, the level of a woman’s education, the work status, and whether there are children involved. However, this was not the case in our study, where the endurance of abuse among our participants seems to be unrelated

to the level of education or work status, a result that supports the findings of Swadely (2017) and Zink et al. (2003). These authors (Swadely, 2017; Zink et al., 2003) found that although educated women have access to work and financial resources, they are still hesitant to leave long-term abusive relationships. Similarly, the findings in this study asserted that despite their awareness, high level of education, and financial independence, the participants not only endured abuse for quite extended periods but also normalized it as part of their marriage. This begs the question of why these women tolerated violence and survived the abusive marriage relationship. The cultural dominance of masculinity and gender norms is one plausible explanation for this result. We believe that the inherent cultural factors outweigh the empowerment gained through women's education. This is confirmed by Heise and Kotsadam (2015), who reported that women's high levels of education help lower the risks of violence only in cultural contexts that do not legitimize abuse. According to a study conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa (Rani et al., 2004), career women were more likely than non-working women to justify wife beating, indicating the powerful role of dominant social and cultural norms in creating images of the "ideal" woman among women themselves, regardless of their working status. This is like the Jordanian context, which is a male-dominated society where women are judged based on their gender rather than their educational qualifications (Haj-Yahia, 2002, 2005). This study, like other studies on survivors of abuse, showed that educated women tried to justify, blame themselves, work harder to please the abuser, and promote themselves; finally, they just went on with their lives by embracing abuse as part of their marriage to bring peace and maintain their marriage.

In summary, it was found that the sociocultural context has a crucial influence on educated women's and financially independent women's decision-making processes regarding enduring abuse in marriage. Staying in an abusive marriage relationship entails much more than simply looking at husband and wife traits. This finding may be the focus of future research to better understand the mechanics of deciding whether to stay in or leave an abusive relationship.

All studies have limitations, and this is no exception. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, we were unable to recruit more than eight participants. Moreover, women's employment was not included as an inclusion criterion in this study, but, by chance, all participants were employed. Thus, future studies should incorporate women's employment as an inclusion criterion if the emphasis is on employment as a variable. Finally, further research is recommended to understand spouses' perspectives on the impact of women's education on marriage to fully comprehend the effects of women's education on marital relationships.

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Author Note

Mayada Daibes, Ph.D., CNS, is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Nursing, Philadelphia University, Jordan. Her research interest is focused on employing qualitative methods to study minorities and vulnerable populations, emphasizing gender and power-related issues. Please direct correspondence to mdaibes@philadelphia.edu.jo.

Reema Safadi, RN, Ph.D., LCCE, is a Professor at the School of Nursing, the University of Jordan, Department of Maternal and Child Health Nursing. Her research interests include nursing education, women's health, and gender issues. She was granted the Fulbright

Scholarship Award, 2015-2016, to the University of Pittsburgh, USA. Please direct correspondence to r.safadi@ju.edu.jo.

Acknowledgements: Our thanks go to the women who shared with us their private life experiences.

Grants and funding information: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest: Mayada A. Daibes and Reema R. Safadi declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Article Citation

Daibes, M. A., & Safadi, R. R. (2023). Torn between the real me and the social me: Educated women's perspectives of surviving marital abuse. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(3), 661-676. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5692>
