Theorizing the Process of Leaving a Violent Marriage and Getting a Divorce in Tehran

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Abstract

This study utilized qualitative methods to develop a theory regarding the process used by Tehranian women who leave violent marriages to get a divorce. Findings from semistructured, in-depth interviews with nine women in Tehran who left their abusive husbands suggested that there are six stages in this process: "denial," "using cognitive and internal strategies to save marriage," "using behavioral and external strategies to save marriage," "seeking power to end violence," "preparation to leave marriage," and "termination" stage. The implications of this study help therapists working with women in Tehran who are living in violent marriages and provide effective prevention and intervention services that are appropriately targeted to the specific needs of Iranian women.

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Violence against women is known as a human rights issue, and is an important international health problem with serious consequences for women's mental, physical, and sexual health (García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, &Watts, 2005). Intimate partner violence (IPV) throughout the world has received considerable research attention. A review of more than 50 studies in 35 countries indicated that between 10% and 52% of women report that they had experienced physical IPV at some point in their lives, and between 10% and 30% of them had experienced sexual violence by an intimate partner (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010; Oram, Trevillion, Feder, & Howard, 2013). This high prevalence level highlights the seriousness of this issue. Despite the fact that IPV has both short- and long-term destructive consequences, such as direct physical injury, psychosomatic pain, panic attacks, nervousness, insomnia, depression, disturbance in sexual feelings, and fear of intimacy (Black, 2011; Trevillion, Oram, Feder, & Howard, 2012), some women stay in violent marriages. During the past two decades, attention in some Western counties, including the United States, has been devoted to investigating how women are able to leave their abusive partners (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Martin et al., 2000; Rosen & Stith, 1993; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999); however, the literature does not address Iranian women's experience dealing with IPV or leaving violent marriages. In this study, we interviewed women in Tehran (capital city of Iran) who experienced violence in their marriage and divorced.

Importance of the Study

This study highlights the challenges faced by women in Tehran who choose to leave violent marriages. To understand the context within which this study was conducted, it is important to understand various factors specific to Tehran, including women's rights and to have some cultural background about marriage and divorce in Iran.

Tehran is the capital city of Iran and has a population more than 12 million people. The majority of the population are Muslim from different ethnic groups. One source reports that one out of four marriages in Iran ends in divorce (Soltani-GardFaramarzi & Pakzed, 2015). Research on the prevalence of IPV in Iran has varied. The prevalence of physical abuse in a sample of university students was 55% and it was 60% among women in Tehran (Ghahari, Atefvahid, & Yousefi, 2006). In other studies, a range of 47% to 81% of women were reported to have experienced IPV in Iran (Ardabily, Moghadam, Salsali, Ramezanzadeh, & Nedjat, 2011; Eezazi, 2005).

There is no official social, legal, or financial support in Iran for women who are in violent marriages. In Civil Law, there are just two codes in defense

of women rights. One is a Code 1103, which states that the couple is required to offer good companionship, and Code 1115 of the Civil law is that, if a woman in a shared home is at risk of losing her life, honor, and finance, she can leave the home and alimony is awarded to her. But there is no exact law based on these two codes to protect women against violence (Safaee & Emami, 2012). Recently, discussions about providing services for victims, such as shelters (safe homes) have begun (EntekhabKhabar, 2016; Online News Site); however, services are currently not available.

Iran has a unique culture regarding marriage and men and women's interaction. There is family and social pressure on women to marry and no cultural expectation that couples will have a dating period to get to know each other before marriage (Mahdavi, 2007). Based on Islamic teaching, men and women's contact before marriage is very limited and any kind of physical contact is forbidden and is sin (Safaee & Emami, 2012). For religious families, which most Iranian families are, it is not acceptable to let their daughters be in a relation with a man before marriage and it is a part of their value to be chaste (Ezazi, 2005). Of course, this does not mean that some young people do not violate the restriction, but still, it is taboo and most young people who have relationships before marriage try to hide it from their family. Most marriages are arranged through families, and young girls and boys are expected to inform their family if they are going to date someone, so that their relationship would be under the supervision of families.

Besides this, family is viewed as a highly important social institution and the main part of every person's social identity in Islamic countries (Abu-Ras, 2007; Amin, 2000). For the family, the marital bond must be preserved at all costs (Douki, Nacef, Belhadj, Bouasker, & Ghachem, 2003). Battered women are generally advised to forgive their husbands to protect their children and their home. Women are reluctant to report marital violence because of the risk of facing judgment. Battered women, who use the law to remove violent husbands from the home or issue a protection order against them, may be ostracized by their community and blamed for undermining family stability and unity (Ezazi, 2005; Haj-Yahia, 1998). This can be attributed to the prevailing belief that divorce is against children's best interests; the woman's personal reputation and the reputation of her family of origin is damaged by divorce, many women fear living alone, losing custody of their children,[1] and stigmas around divorced women take precedence over their own well-being and safety (Amin, 2000). In the majority of cases, even if violence is disclosed, family, police, and even health professionals are not of great help, given the importance attached to maintaining the marital link (Douki et al., 2003; Ghahari et al., 2006). All these issues provide challenges for women who want to leave violent marriages.

There is little research, besides prevalence rates, regarding violence against women in Iran. Although in Western societies, research on the process of leaving a violent marriage has been published, we know little about this process in Iran. As services begin to be developed to support female victims of IPV in Iran, it is critical that more is known about the different stages of change that women go through and factors that influence this process. This study was designed to provide a better understanding of IPV in Iran by theorizing about women's process of leaving violent marriages in Tehran. This research was guided by the following question:

> **Research Question 1:** What process did participants go through to leave their violent marriages and get divorced?

The study was designed to help social service providers in Iran provide effective IPV prevention and intervention services that are appropriately targeted to the needs of Iranian women. Results from this study can also be helpful to providers in the United States who are working with Iranian women in violent relationships. Furthermore, in many other collectivistic cultures such as Iran, women deal with similar family and social pressures to remain married. Therefore, the results of this study can help mental health professionals deal with many of these issues when they are working with women from Middle-Eastern, African, and Asian countries.

We used feminist theory to guide our work, although, in this article, we seek to develop a theory of the process of leaving and move beyond feminist theory and gender inequality; however, as the patriarchal system is dominant in Iran, feminist theory can help us understand some of the challenges Iranian women face leaving violent marriages. Feminist theory defines domestic violence as a male coercion of women (Bacchi & Eveline, 2015), and the cause of coercion is rooted in male dominance and the patriarchal system (Houston, 2014). Patriarchy provides the structural and ideological underpinnings of male violence against women, and violence against women that takes place is only possible in a social context that defines women as subordinate to men. In this system, men have more power and privilege than women have and they have access to structural resources, which deem them inferior or superior (Yick, 2001). This system is predominant in Iran.

Method

Grounded theory procedures were used to develop concepts that provide a theoretical explanation of participants' experiences of leaving their violent marriages. Data gathering and analyses were integrated and the process of

data collection, analysis, and theorizing were conducted simultaneously (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). No hypotheses were advanced and the theory was developed inductively from the data. "Because grounded theorists view phenomena as continually changing and seek to examine processes" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 135), this method is appropriate to examine these women's experiences of leaving their violent marriages.

Sample and Procedures

This study was grounded in in-depth interview data from nine divorced Tehranian women who had experienced severe physical violence by their husbands. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author's university. Participants were recruited via three private psychologists and a lawyer in Tehran. Each of these professionals had advertised that they worked with domestic violence cases. The professionals asked potential participants whether they would be willing to share their experience with the researcher. If they were willing to meet with the researcher, they were asked to sign a permission form, which permitted the professionals to give potential participant's names and phone number to the researcher.

The researcher contacted potential participants and screened them over the phone to ensure they met the inclusion criteria: (a) 18 years old and above, (b) experienced physical violence in their marriage, (c) currently divorced from their abusive husband, and (d) one of the main reason for the divorce had been repeated and severe physical violence. The researcher met with participants who met the inclusion criteria at a time and location that was most convenient for participants. Two of the women preferred to do the interview in their house and the rest of them came to the psychologist's office. Before beginning the data collection process, participants signed an informed consent document and were assured orally by the researcher that they could omit any question they did not want to answer, withdraw from the research at any time, and had the right to contact the researcher within 48 hr after the interview and ask her not to use their data in this research. Each interview took 2½ to 3½ hr with a short break when participants needed it. When the interviews were scheduled, participants each reported that they preferred to participate in one longer interview rather than to return for a second interview because of the challenges of traveling in Tehran. The interview started with participants completing the consent form and the demographic questionnaire and ended with the interviewer offering a US$30 gift card to thank participants for their time.

Participants' age at the time of leaving the marriage and getting a divorce ranged from 24 to 44 years. Two participants had a high school diploma and two had only completed elementary school and the other five had at least a

Table 1. Descriptive Information on Participants.

Variables	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Age	38	6.41	31	46
Spouse age	42	7.15	34	52
Age at the time of divorce	33	7.96	24	44
Spouse age at the time of divorce	38	7.14	31	50
Education	3.1	1.00	1	4
Marriage duration	9.11	7.3	1	20
Time since divorce	4.11	3.40	1	10
Number of years living in Tehran	30.33	14	4	46
Income now	US$725	US$330	US$580	US$870

Note. Education: 1 = *less than high school diploma*; 2 = *high school diploma*; 3 = *bachelor's degree*; 4 = *master's degree*.

bachelor's degree. The average participant had been married for 9 years. Six participants had only one child, one had two children, and two had no children. Most participants' ethnicity was Fars and lived in Tehran from the ages 4 to 46. Four participants did not have a job at the time they left their marriage (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape recorded, and the tapes were transcribed after each interview. Additional notes were also taken during the interview. Two of the Farsi-speaking authors used open coding to look for themes from the data and cross coded each other's coded data. Each researcher wrote her own understanding of the participants' experience of violence and the way they left their violent marriage on the margin of each page they used to code the data. Charmez (2006) emphasizes writing memos "which catch your thoughts, your understanding, and connections you make and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue" (p. 72). The validity of data was addressed through analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002). Next, the main quotes that emerged from the themes were translated into English so that the coauthor who only reads English could cross code a third time. From this process, the main themes emerged, and compared with each other within each interview and among the different participants. Then, the links between subthemes and themes were refined and key concepts identified. At the last stage, the main themes and concepts were shared with five participants who agreed to participate in this stage of the project to evaluate the validity of the labels and confirm the findings.

Results

To understand findings of this study, three main factors are important. First, young people in Iran experience intense family and social pressure for marriage (Eezazi, 2005). Second, Iran does not have a culture of dating. Finally, such as many other Eastern and Western cultures, there is no formal education about the intricacies and complexities of marriage or IPV. Even those young people who date do not have enough knowledge or skills to use their time in the best way to get to know each other or to recognize red flags, and most do not participate in premarital counseling (Mahdavi, 2007). For example, one participant, Afsaneh is 33 years old, without a child. Her marriage lasted for 6 months and she has been divorced for 5 years. She said,

> We never get any information or knowledge about marriage in school or on TV and premarital counseling in not a part of the process to know about marriage, so many people marry without knowing enough about marriage and some of them just want to marry. For me, I was 27 years old and my younger sister was married before me, which was alarming for my family and I. As at this age most girls should be married, my father just wanted me to marry someone, no matter who, and he told me, do not worry I will help you to manage your marriage, so I feel as I am not a young girl, I do not need a wedding or a white dress, I should just marry.

Lack of knowledge about violence led participants to ignore red flags. Tina, a 33-year-old participant, divorced her husband after 8 years of marriage and then remarried him. They have a 2-year-old son. She divorced him again almost a year before the interview. She said,

> Once when we went out, we got stuck in a traffic jam and a driver close to our car started shouting and honking his horn. My husband got out of the car and fought with him and hit him and broke his nose. At that time, I thought, "he is an athlete and he just wants to show his power and physical ability to others and show me he is a powerful man." He had these kinds of behaviors occasionally and I never thought he would do this to me in the future.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework developed from this project, demonstrating the relationship among concepts and providing a map of the process of leaving a violent marriage used by nine women in Tehran. The theory that emerged from the data has six different stages including denial, using cognitive and internal strategies to save marriage, using behavioral and external strategies to save marriage, seeking power to end violence, preparation to leave violent marriage, and termination stage.
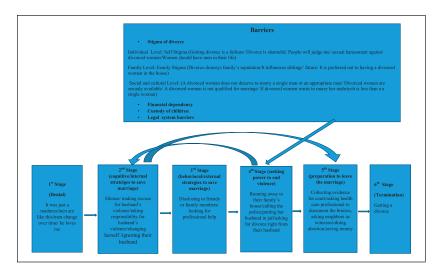
Figure 1. The process of leaving a violent marriage in Iran.

First Stage: Denial

The denial stage began even before the marriage. Participants were eager to get married and tended to deny red flags that might have predicted that their future husbands would become violent toward them. Each participant indicated that she married with the hope of having ideal marriages. None of them ever thought she would experience violence. When violence occurred, they were shocked and it was hard for them to name their husband's aggression as "violence." Each of them tried to deny, minimize, forget, hide, or misinterpret the violence. Foroogh, a 29-year-old participant without a child whose marriage lasted for a year, said,

> I always thought he loved me and if he hit me it was because of his love, but he does not know how to show his love. He monitored me all the time and did not let me go to my parent's home which was so hard for me. I interpreted his suspicions and his controlling behaviors as his love for me and that he did not want to be away from me. Also, after he beat me, he would cry a lot so I thought he was a weak person and he is afraid of losing me. Many times he said, if you leave me I can't live without you.

Another example of the "denial stage" came from Zahra, a 46-year-old participant with a 17-year-old son. Her marriage lasted for 15 years, and at the time of the interview, it has been 2 years since she divorced her husband. She said,

> When he was violent I told myself that all men get angry and it was just a madness, nothing serious. I had heard from my mother that even my father was an angry young man who became a nice person as he got older, so I thought this will be the same for my husband and had the hope that he will change over time.

When participants began to recognize that they were victims of violence, each of them spoke about first-level denial strategies they used to keep the violence private and to save their marriages. However, when the situation got severe, the second stage was initiated, in which they used cognitive and internal strategies to save their marriages by trying to change their thinking about the violence or trying to change themselves so their partner would not be violent.

Second Stage: Cognitive and Internal Strategies to Save the Marriage

In this stage, participants used cognitive strategies and made excuses for their husbands' violence, such as "my husband had a difficult childhood" or "he is sick." In addition, most participants who were using second-level strategies took responsibility for the violence and felt guilty. For example, participants said, "It was my fault that he gets angry" or "I should change myself to what my husband likes." Some of them justified the violence via cultural beliefs, such as "men are violent" and via the cultural standards about the role of women in their marriage, such as "women should be patient and work to change their husband."

Atefeh, 45 years old, lived with her husband for 2 years. She has an 18-year-old son from her previous marriage and divorced a year before the interview. She stated,

> My husband had an awful childhood and whatever he did came from all the abuse he experienced when he was a child. I convinced myself that I had a wonderful childhood and now I should put myself in his shoes to understand him. I thought that marriage was what God wanted for me and He put this person in my life to test me and I should support him and change him. If I leave him what will be my answer to God. I sacrificed only because I did not want to feel guilty in the future and I wanted to make sure I did whatever I could.

Forrogh talked about her experience of first-level strategies:

> I had the mentality or attitude that a woman who divorces is an inflexible person and a person who is hard to get along with. I always told myself that a woman should know how to improve her relationship with her husband and should work on her marriage. If I could not, it means I am not able to handle married life, I was not a patient person and I could not influence my husband. A good woman should work on her marriage. I told myself my husband is a baby and I should change him and it was one of my plans in my life to work on my husband.

Third Stage: Behavioral and External Strategies to Save the Marriage

Most participants, after realizing that internal strategies did not work, began to disclose the abuse to their family and friends and ask for help. At first, they chose to disclose to friends instead of family to protect their family. Sara, a 32-year-old participant whose marriage lasted for 9 years with a 12-year-old son who had been divorced 5 years at the time of the study, said,

> I did not want to make my family sad or worried and it was hard for my family to see me in a violent marriage. I did not want to upset my family. I preferred to ask friends. I thought maybe they can help me before my family being involved in it.

In most cases, participants reported that having someone who listened to them was beneficial and the empathy from their friends was helpful, but most of them did not receive any effective advice from their friends. Razeyeh, a 45-year-old participant with two sons, 20 and 9 years old, was in her marriage for 22 years and divorced 2 years before the interview. She stated,

> I talked with some of my friends and my sister which was good to have someone listen to you. They were empathetic people but they could not do anything. In these situations, everyone has an idea, some people told me that I should change myself, another one told me this is what it is, he is your husband and you should be patient and continue. Some suggested to be more nice to him and some told me to see a psychologist, but their suggestions did not work because they did not know my husband.

Eventually, most participants discussed the violence with their families to seek solutions or support. Some asked their in-laws to talk with their husbands and inhibit the violence. At this stage, participants wanted to find ways to influence their husbands. Tina said,

> I asked my in-laws to have a meeting to see what they could do for our marriage and how they could help their son [her husband]. As we had financial problems, my father-in-law helped us by paying our apartment's rent for a year. They did not even talk about my husband's physical violence. No advice, no admonition, nothing.

Looking for professional help was another strategy six participants used in this stage. They sought individual or couples therapy. Most husbands did not agree to accompany their wives and only one husband who went to therapy

with his wife agreed to continue therapy beyond the first session. The result of therapy for participants was some psychological help for women or helping them to either make decisions to continue or leave their marriages.

> I asked my husband to go for counseling but he said that I am the crazy one and I should go and see a psychologist. I begged him for a while. When he accepted to come with me, he told me that he will come only for one session, no more. Based on the conversation between the therapist and my husband, the therapist told me that my husband had borderline personality disorder and as he is not willing to continue psychotherapy, I should make the decision about staying or leaving the relationship. (Atefeh)

Fourth Stage: Seeking Power to End Violence

When their strategies to end the violence in the second and third stages did not work and the violence became even more severe, participants reported that they focused on protecting themselves from violence by seeking power to end violence by "running away to their parent's house," "calling the police," "putting their husband in jail," "asking for divorce right,"[2] and "gathering evidence to receive the right to divorce."

> I really did not want to go to the police station or have the police in my home but I had to show my husband that I could do all these things if I wanted to. I wanted to warn him to stop his violent behaviors. Once he beat me badly and I became comatose. My husband was afraid and called the hospital. They reported it to the police. They put my husband in jail and told me it was time that I take the "the right to divorce" from my husband. (Afsaneh)

Going through the process of leaving a violent marriage was not easy and as Figure 1 illustrates, there were some back and forth experiences. Participants tried to save their marriages with the resources they had and they sought power by legal actions to stop the violence. Although the violence became more severe, still they had some challenges ahead to get divorced, which illustrates the complexity of the divorce process in Iran. Most participants reverted back to the second stage and continued using cognitive and internal strategies to rationalize their partners' violence until their lives were at risk. Some of the main barriers and challenges that kept them in violent marriages included financial dependency on their husbands, laws in Iran that give custody of children to the husband in most cases because fathers are supposed to be sole financial providers even when women work, and fear of stigmas around divorce.

Barriers

Financial dependency. Some participants were financially dependent on their husbands, which made their decision to leave their violent marriage much more difficult especially if they did not have skills to earn money.

> I thought to myself that I am almost 30 years old, without a job and no income, and no idea what I wanted to do in this society. The idea of being alone was so scary for me, I preferred to stay. At least I did not have to be worried about my housing and basic needs. My husband threatened me that he would never pay my Nafagheh[3] or Mahriyeh[4] or any money for our child's need. (Sara)

Custody of children. The process of decision making for participants who had a child/children also included a process in which they wanted to leave but barriers kept them from leaving. When they saw they may lose custody of their children, many participants reported that, for some period of time, they preferred to stay in their marriage unless their children were affected by the violence, their husband was violent toward their child, or their children showed some psychological and behavioral problems because of being in a violent house.

> When I realized that I am pregnant, I decided to stay in the marriage because I did not want to raise a child without a father and I was sure that if I leave the marriage, my husband won't give my child to me just to torture me. I knew that although he could not take care of our son and he will leave him to his family, the law supports him to have the child. (Zahra)

Soraya is 34 years old and has an 18-year-old daughter. She got married when she was 14. Her marriage lasted for 8 years and she had been divorced 10 years before the interview.

> It was hard for me to leave my child and I was afraid for her future. All my family members and friends told me that every child needs a father and a mother and since I had a daughter they told me that I had to stay in my marriage because my daughter really needs me.

> When I got pregnant, I convinced myself to stay in my marriage just because of the baby. At that time, more than ever, I wanted to keep my marriage with whatever I could. I really hated for people to judge my child as a child of divorce and I knew how divorce can hurt children. (Tina)

Stigma of divorce. Eight participants reported that they were afraid of the stigma around divorce and around being a divorced woman. They grew up in families and in a society that offered negative messages about getting divorced and shared rumors and judgments around divorced women. Participants knew

that, in many cases, divorced women may not have a secure life in society. These fears and concerns regarding stigma attributed to divorce affected participants at the individual level, how they saw themselves as divorced women, and reduced their likelihood of leaving violent marriages. One issue that increased this stigma is that, in Iran, birth certificates are required to be updated when individuals marry and divorce. Therefore, when individuals are required to present legal documentation (e.g., when they apply for a job), they are required to show their birth certificates, which indicates that they are divorced. Participants experienced and heard prejudices about divorce and also how the culture and the legal system treated divorced women. These messages made participants afraid of leaving their violent marriages and they heard from other divorced women that it is not easy to deal with these stigmas.

> I did not want to leave my marriage. It was a failure for me because I thought there is always something wrong with a woman who left a marriage. I thought that a woman whose marriage ends in divorce was a maladjusted woman and a woman should work hard on her marriage and should change the marriage to a better one. (Razieh)

Tina also talked about how stigma affected her decision to leave.

> I thought as I started this marriage I should stay in it because I liked my life and every year on our anniversary I just was thankful that we were continuing our marriage while some of our friends got divorced. I hated being a divorced woman. I hated to have the data about the divorce on my birth certificate because when you have that data on your birth certificate, there are a lot of rumors about you and some men take advantage of you and they might think you are available to fill their sexual needs. There are men who always harass you and do not let you have your life.

> My family told me that if you divorce, people talk behind your back. Your divorce will ruin our reputation or our friends will judge us. My elder sister also had a lot of conflicts with her husband, so if I got a divorce, people may think there is something wrong with my parents' daughters. They may think it is their fault that we have problems with married life. I heard from my parents many times that we should not be in contact with someone who is divorced because being a divorced woman is a negative thing and it is bad to be a friend with a woman who has gotten a divorce. (Sara)

Problems with the legal system. A serious barrier discussed by participants involved requirements by the legal system to get a divorce. When participants took the complaint to court to end violence, when they called the police to ask for help, or when they filed for divorce, they had difficulty proving that they had experienced violence.

> It was disappointing to see that even the police did not take me seriously and just told me all couples fight and it is not something important that you want to end your marriage because of it. They just encouraged me to continue my marriage. My experience with the judge in the court was the same, that as long as violence does not cause serious damage or injury they did not take it seriously. (Forrogh)

Fifth Stage: Preparation to Leave the Marriage

Filing for divorce is a difficult process in Iran, especially when a woman does not ask for the "the right to divorce" before getting married. Because of Iranian laws, husbands can give "the right to divorce" to their wives if the wife asks for it before the official marriage. One of the options for women whose husbands do not give them the right is to "collect evidence for the court" to show that the severity of violence makes them unable to continue their marriage. Five participants went to professional health care and asked them to document the bruises. Three ran to their neighbor's house when their husbands were violent, so that their neighbors could witness it and testify in front of the police or in court. One participant realized that she was pregnant and aborted her child with her friend's help. Two participants had jobs but their husbands took their salary. So, they tried to "save some part of the money."

> My husband took all my salary every month and I had just a little money. When I made my decision to leave this marriage, I started to do overtime and save that money for myself and my mother kept it for me. (Zahra)

Foroogh talked about her preparation for divorce this way:

> My family and I finalized the decision that I should leave my husband but, as I had no evidence to prove that my husband had been violent, I decided to collect evidence and documents. Every time that he was violent, I opened our apartment's door so that neighbors could hear his screaming or cursing and if he attacked me, I ran away to our neighbor's house, so they could testify in the court about what they saw. Last time that he beat me badly and broke my arm, I asked the physician to document it for me.

Afsaneh's story of preparation for divorce involved getting an abortion.

> I talked with my close friend about my pregnancy and asked her for help. If I keep the baby I must stay in this marriage which is full of violence and hate. I am sure in the future I won't be able to continue my marriage and I do not want my child to be involved with our conflicts and be a child of divorce. My friend bought the drugs from the black market for me, I used the drug and no baby anymore.

Sixth Stage: Termination

Although participants went though many difficulties in their marriages and experienced different types of violence, ending the marriage was not an easy decision for any of them. Five participants had to sacrifice their financial rights (*Mahriyeh* and *Nafaqa*) or the custody of their child to get a divorce and only two could demand and receive financial rights.

> After the last violence that sent me to the hospital, I got the right to divorce so it was easy to get divorced provided that I should forget about all my financial rights. My lawyer told me that if I want to get financial rights, it will take time. He thought it was not worthwhile to go to court all the time and said that myr husband is not the type of person who will give you your money, so it is better to forget those rights. This is what I did and I left my marriage with almost nothing. (Afsaneh)

Among the important findings of this study was the pattern of "turning points," which are events that moved participants from one stage to the next. Women in this study experienced some negative and positive turning points, which moved them toward leaving their violent marriages.

Turning points. Women participating in this study identified negative turning points, such as escalation of severe physical, psychological, and financial abuse; being disappointed in their marriage; believing that their lives were at risk; and their husband's infidelity.

> Once when there was a big argument between us, he told me that he is not satisfied in our marriage and it was the first time that I told him neither was I. Suddenly my husband attacked me, grabbed the phone, cursed me, and beat me badly. I was hospitalized for two weeks and after that I had to use a wheelchair for two months. It was the end of road for me as there was a risk of life. (Forrogh)

Tina also talked about her experience of negative turning points:

> I could deal with whatever he did but when he cheated on me, it was the end of the world. He denied for a short time but after that he openly talked about her in front of me to torture me. He started nagging all the time. As I breastfed my son, he told me that my breasts are disgusting for him. He humiliated me for my body, for my cooking, for the way I designed our house, for everything. I was almost close to crazy so I called my parents and told them if they do not take me out of this marriage I will kill myself.

Beside these negative experiences, some participants experienced positive turning points when they received emotional and financial support from their family at the last three stages, which motivated them to leave their marriage.

> My mother and my brothers all encouraged me to leave my husband. They criticized me for not telling them that my husband was violent. My father promised me to be financially supportive and asked me not to be worried about my future. All my family and friends confirmed my decision of leaving my marriage which meant a lot to me and helped me to be more confident about my decision. (Atefeh)

Discussion

This study focused on the process of leaving violent marriages experienced by nine women living in the capital city of Iran, Tehran. We developed a theory about the process of leaving a violent husband in Iran in an effort to expand the limited knowledge about this process. The theory that emerged from the data has six different stages including denial, cognitive, and internal strategies to save the marriage; behavioral and external strategies to save the marriage; seeking power to end violence; preparation to leave the marriage; and termination stage. This process was complicated as these women were financially dependent on their husbands, feared losing their children, and were afraid of negative stigmas around divorce. Between these stages, there were turning points such as escalation of violence, being disappointed, and family emotional and financial support, which moved them to leave their marriage.

Making decisions about continuing or leaving an abusive relationship is not an easy or sudden decision for most women (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002), and for many women, it may take years before ending the marriage. This study supports previous research that found that women move through stages in a nonlinear fashion and are able to identify turning points in each level of change and internal and external factors that influenced their decisions to leave their marriages (Chang et al., 2006). The current study also supports previous research that suggests for most women in violent marriages, the first experience of violence is shocking and they do not believe their loved one is violent toward them. They usually minimize or deny it (Chang et al., 2006; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). For Iranian women in our study, in the second stage, they dealt with the violence by using cognitive and internal strategies and tried to solve the violence by themselves. They continued these strategies until violence became more severe, which lead them to the next stage in which they sought behavioral solutions for saving their marriages such as looking for

help. These findings were consistent with findings in a study of 23 abused women in the United States who left their marriage and used more cognitive processes in earlier stages, and in the later stages, they used more behavioral processes (Burke, Denison, Gielen, McDonnell, & O'Campo, 2004).

In general, leaving marriages in Iran, such as in most other societies around the globe, has emotional, social, and financial consequences as well as other barriers that prevent women from leaving. One of these barriers is financial dependency. Participants in this study who were financially dependent on their husbands stayed longer in their marriages, especially those who did have skills or education degrees. They were worried that if they left their marriage, they would be unable to manage their lives. This finding is supported by a great number of researchers in the United States (Abraham, 2000; Al-Badayneh, 2012; Bornstein, 2006; Kim & Gray, 2008; Meyer, 2012). For these Iranian women, however, even when parents were willing to have them move back to their home, it was difficult for them to live with their parents as they were used to having their own independent life. Participants wanted to live by themselves after divorce but without having income, it was impossible to do so.

Another finding related to barriers was the custody of children. Some women who had children stayed in their abusive marriages for a longer period. Some of them came to the fourth stage (seeking power to end violence) but flipped back to previous stages and continued their relationships. Based on the civil law in Iran, the full custody of children (boys after 2 and girls after 7 years old) is given to the father if parents get a divorce (Garrusi, Nakhaee, & Zangiabadi, 2008), because fathers are supposed to be the sole financial providers after divorce. Therefore, many women prefer to stay in their marriages rather than getting a divorce and losing the custody of their child/ren (Few & Rosen, 2005; Taherkhani, Negarandeh, Simbar, & Ahmadi, 2014; Vakili, Nadrian, Fathipoor, Boniadi, & Morowatisharifabad, 2010).

Stigma of divorce was another concern of these women, which is a very immense and extensive component of the Iranian culture. Participants reported that at the fourth stage (seeking power to end violence), stigma of divorce was a significant concern they had which kept them from moving forward and leaving their marriages. However, the stigma of divorce did not simply become a concern in this stage. This continued to be a concern from the beginning of the marriage and even after the divorce. The fear of others' judgment and being labeled as a divorced woman is a great concern among women, even those who live in a big and modern city such as Tehran. Stigmatization is "the condition of being denied full social acceptance" (King et al., 2007, p. 58), and research that has examined the impact of divorce in Iran found that stigma is more associated with embarrassment, shame,

isolation, and compromised self-esteem in women than men (Scambler, 2004). Becoming divorced in Iran makes women vulnerable in society and takes away opportunities such as being in a safe work place or getting married to someone they choose. As indicated in Figure 1, the stigma that women were concerned about came from different layers, from individual levels, and the way these women judged themselves and from legal and cultural systems. Stigma can include "elements of labeling, separating, stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination that co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Although divorce is more acceptable in Iran recently than in the past, stigma related to divorce continues to have a significant role in the perception of others and may reduce women's perceptions of self-worth or may become a significant barrier for women in violent marriages.

Besides these barriers, participants faced difficulty in the process of proving their husband's violence. According to Iranian law, only if a husband is violent repeatedly and if life is hard and impossible for women, would divorce be legally justified. Otherwise, the justice system tries to encourage couples to get back together and continue their marriage. This experience, along with other barriers mentioned above, made the decision to leave the marriage especially difficult for these survivors of domestic violence in Tehran; and, for a period of time, they did not have other options except to continue their marriage. So, they returned to cognitive and internal strategies until they experienced turning points, including when the physical and psychological violence became intolerable, and for some of them, they became life threatening.

Turning points in the process of making decisions to end a relationship have been examined in the IPV literature. Patzel (2001) in a study of 10 women who left their abusive relationships, identified turning points such as escalation of abuse and infidelity that caused women to move closer toward leaving abusive marriage. A turning point can be when it becomes obvious that children are affected by the violence and they show physical or behavioral problems (Davis & Chapman, 2002; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Patzel, 2001). Although what we found as turning points was consistent with previous studies in the United States, cultural, legal, and religious barriers in Iran made the process of leaving especially challenging. Besides negative turning points, there were positive turning points such as emotional and financial support received from family and friends, which helped participants be more confident about their decision. The role of family support in making decisions and leaving a violent marriage has also been identified in previous research (Clark, Silverman, Shahrouri, Everson-Rose, & Groce, 2010; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Hester, 2011; Hoff, 2016).

Implications

This was the first study to address the process of leaving a violent marriage among Iranian women. The findings are fruitful and provide a framework, which helps professionals recognize where and how they could intervene, and how they can prevent violence in intimate relationships. These findings may help clinicians to be able to modify or develop strategies for helping women. Future research should extend these findings by using different methods with other populations of Iranian women. Although the process of leaving abusive marriages is difficult throughout the globe, religious, legal, and cultural values in Iran make the process of leaving violent marriages especially difficult and, as services are beginning to be developed for battered women in Iran, it is important that these issues be taken into consideration, rather than simply attempting to take services that are helpful in Western countries and apply them to Iranian society.

Making paradigm shifts and cultural changes in a society is a long-term process and it takes time and effort. Many Iranian women marry without knowing enough about their future husband, about their lawful rights in marriage, and about IPV, which makes them vulnerable in their marriage. The first and the most important solution is to educate not only women but also men and families about the importance of having knowledge about these subjects. Social media can play a significant role in educating society and reminding people about the necessity of premarital counseling and about couples getting to know each other under the supervision of an expert. Social media also can be helpful in making society sensitive about IPV and can make efforts to destigmatize divorce. It would be helpful to offer trainings about lawful rights, marriage and couple adjustment, and IPV as a part of the Iranian education system to increase awareness for both young girls and boys about the importance of these subjects. As violence against women has a strong root in mistaken religious and cultural beliefs, religious leaders can help to educate society and change these beliefs. As most of victims lose their self-confidence and self-esteem, professionals, such as therapists, can help women to be confident about their decisions and challenge cultural components, which are judgmental against divorced women. Moreover, women can ask for the right to divorce and custody of their children and add it to their marriage certificate before officially signing it, which would allow them to leave their marriage, when it comes to violence, without being concerned about financial rights and losing custody of their children. Another strategy may be through empowering young girls by encouraging them to value education or learning skills, which help them to be financially independent.

Currently in Iran, as demonstrated in this research, many women stay in abusive marriages due to the fear of not being accepted. In addition, laws

regarding IPV in Iran are often unclear. Participants in this study were clear that the justice system and the police system were often barriers to their abilities to leave violent marriages. It is essential that changes be made in the justice system and police system to meet the needs of victims. Expansion of social services in public and private centers to help women access these centers is also needed. A national plan to protect vulnerable women and victims of violence, and to collect data regarding the incidence of IPV is also needed. To facilitate the process of recording the information required by law, it would be important for health centers and clinics to document IPV and to provide this documentation to the police. Cooperation between health centers, social service agencies, the judicial system, and police is needed to enhance protection for victims. Furthermore, participants in this study emphasized that the elimination of legal uncertainties in the context of IPV on a wide scale in the country is needed.

Limitation and Suggestions for Future Studies

The first limitation of this study is the small number of participants. The second is that the study focused only on women in Tehran. It is recommended that future research uses a larger sample size with different ethnicities and in rural and urban communities in Iran. As women with different ethnicities may have different experiences of IPV, the findings would be helpful to see how the theory we developed can apply across different ethnicities. It would also be helpful if future research included participants' family members to see what their experience was in this process. Also, in a larger sample, a separate process might emerge, when participants with or without children, were studied separately. In addition, findings from this study could be used to develop quantitative research studies in which this developed theory could be tested on a larger sample.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. According to Iran's Civil Code, after divorce, a woman's child custody rights are determined by law based on the child's age. Article 1169 of the civil code originally gave women primary custody rights over their children until boys turn

2 and girls turn 7, but the age for boys was later raised to 7 as well. After children reach the age threshold, custody goes to the father because he is supposed to be the sole financial provider, unless his insanity or some other disqualifying factor is proven in court (Safaee & Emamei, 2012).

2. Article 1133 says,

    A man can divorce his wife whenever he wants. Women also can file for divorce in some certain cases, including: if her husband does not pay the alimony, if he is absent for four years, if he is an addict, cannot perform sexually, and cannot provide financially. (Safaee & Emamei, 2012, p. 87)

3. *Nafaqa* (maintenance): The second financial consequence of the marriage contract is the man's duty and women's right to maintenance. A husband, under Islamic law, is obliged to provide his wife with the required maintenance (Article 1106). According to Article 1107 of the Civil Code,

    Nafaqa includes all reasonable and appropriate needs of the wife such as dwelling, clothing, food, furniture, the cost of health and remedy, and a servant if the wife is accustomed to have servants or if she needs one because of illness or defects of limbs. (Safaee & Emamei, 2012, p.93)

4. Mahriyeh (dowry): A key feature of all Muslim marriage contracts that differs from a standard Western civil marriage license is a provision regarding *mahriyeh* (or *mahr*), a sum of money or any other valuables that the husband gives or undertakes to give to the bride upon marriage. According to Article 1082 of the Civil Code, "Immediately after the conclusion of the marriage contract, the wife becomes the owner of the mahriyeh and can take possession of it or spend it in any way that she wishes" (Safaee & Emamei, 2012, p.101).

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