Article

"You Don't Want to Be Perceived as Wild and Unruly": How Ethnic Minority Women Experience and Negotiate Their Autonomy within Honor-Related Contexts

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Abstract: Within honor-related contexts, women's appearances, actions, and life choices are closely tied to the honor of the entire family. As a result, women who opt to deviate from prevailing feminine honor codes are subject to violence as a means of restoring the family's good name. Based on the life stories of fourteen Dutch ethnic minority women who deviated from feminine honor codes, this study investigates how women experience their autonomy as a process within their social context. Rather than analyzing this process through a binary conception of autonomy (i.e., agency/coercion), this study highlights women's experiences through a relational approach to autonomy. In doing so, this study uncovers three overarching themes: (1) honor codes are enforced implicitly through expectations surrounding the role of "the honorable daughter/wife", and explicitly through a shared religious and/or ethnic identity, (2) women detach themselves from honor codes either by strategically renegotiating honor codes or after experiencing a turning point that triggers an immediate process towards detachment from honor codes, and (3) women's decision-making processes are accompanied with health concerns caused by lingering guilt, social shame, and isolation.

Keywords: honor-based violence; autonomy; honor codes; ethnic minorities; migration

1. Introduction

Farah (age 21) was 13 years old when she decided to start wearing a headscarf. "Even as a child, I felt pressure," she explains. "And I knew this pressure would only get worse once I would go to high school. So I thought, 'let's just get it over with.' My parents were of course thrilled with the fact that I wore it of my own accord." After two years, she regretted her decision. "But I can't simply back out of the choice I made as a child . . . So now I run the risk of being ostracized by my family" (Ezzeroili 2022).

The above excerpt from an anonymous interview report in the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, illustrates how honor-related settings violate women's personal autonomy regarding their life choices. While violence against women knows no social, economic, or national boundaries, the type of violence in honor settings is fundamentally different from other forms of violence against women (Gregory et al. 2020). In communities in which the concept of honor governs daily life, women are perceived as symbolic and physical markers of a family's good name (Christianson et al. 2021; Cihangir 2012; King 2008). That is why women's appearances, actions, and life choices are closely tied to the honor of the entire family (Christianson et al. 2021; Cooney 2014).

Consequently, girls and women are instilled with feminine honor codes, namely: sexual purity, modest behavior and dress, discretion in social relationships with men, obedience to male authority, limited movement outside of the private sphere, and limited choice in selecting a marriage partner (Christianson et al. 2021; Cihangir 2012; King 2008). To preserve the family's honor, men are instilled with honor codes regarding the ability to uphold family authority, as well as the responsibility to protect the family's good name (Christianson et al. 2021; Cihangir 2012; Cooney 2014; King 2008). This means that when a

woman deviates from feminine honor codes, this negatively reflects on her family's honor as well as the honor of the men in her family.

As a result, women who opt to deviate from prevailing feminine honor codes are subject to violence as a means of restoring the family's good name (Awwad 2001; Gregory et al. 2020). Such violence is generally referred to as honor-based violence, and can be defined as any form of mental or physical violence committed from a collective mindset in response to a (threat of) violation of a family's honor of which the outside world is aware or threatens to become aware (Ferwerda and Leiden 2005). To forestall this occurrence, girls and women constantly negotiate their autonomy within feminine honor codes—as illustrated through Farah's quote. This means that the type of violence that is inherent to feminine honor codes may be subtle and not literally imposed since girls and women constantly adjust their behavior according to the honor codes they were taught from a young age. That is why, in this paper, I would like to broaden the above definition to include all gender-specific honor codes that violate an individual's autonomy regarding their life choices.

While in Farah's case such codes are mediated through Islamic feminine chastity norms (i.e., wearing a headscarf and chaste clothes), gender-specific honor codes are common within many migrant communities living in the West (Cooney 2014; Pope 2012), irrespective of whether they are comprised of Muslims or Christians (Lutz 1991; Merz et al. 2009). That is, migrating to a new country results in a permanent shift in the social fabric of one's life. To cope with the impact of becoming an ethnic minority within a white-majority society, group-oriented behavior towards the family and the (ethnic and/or religious) community is often stimulated through shared honor codes within families and communities (Buitelaar 2007; Merz et al. 2009; van Tubergen 2007). For instance, the virginity norm (i.e., women's sexual purity and abstinence from sex outside of marriage) can act as a symbolic frontier between the ethnic minority community and the surrounding white-majority society (Ketner et al. 2004).

There is a growing body of empirical literature on the gendered violence that is inherent to such honor codes (e.g., van Bergen and Saharso 2015; Christianson et al. 2021; Cihangir 2012). However, there remains a scarcity of research investigating the complex ways in which ethnic minority women experience their autonomy within honor codes when they opt to deviate from them. Previous studies largely took the virginity norm as a focus (Buitelaar 2002; Cense 2014; Cinthio 2015; Griffiths 2015; Hawkey et al. 2018; Saharso et al. 2023). However, it is important to recognize that gender-specific honor codes encompass a broad range of behaviors and attitudes that include, but are not limited to, the virginity norm.

Moreover, a review of the literature on honor-based violence (Mayeda and Vijayku-mar 2016) highlights that honor killings receive a disproportionate amount of attention compared to other forms of honor-based violence that are far more prevalent. As a result, the more subtle forms of honor-based violence that are not literally imposed are underexamined in the empirical literature.

Accordingly, rather than placing a focus on the virginity norm or exclusively focusing on direct forms of honor-based violence, in this paper, I aim to explore how ethnic minority women experience their autonomy within the context of honor codes in general. Specifically, I aim to investigate women's decision-making processes when they opt to deviate from honor codes.

2. Theoretical Perspective

According to Cooney (2014, p. 94–95), within honor settings, women's decision-making processes are affected by three forms of stratification: male rule (women's lower place in the domestic and social hierarchy), group rule (collective interests of the group take precedence over personal wishes), and elderly rule (obedience to the authority of older family members). In this paper, I analyze how these three forms of stratification play a role

in the decision-making processes of ethnic minority women who deviate from honor codes. Here, a relational approach to autonomy will be used as an analytical lens.

Relational autonomy is an umbrella term with multiple interpretations and definitions. Nevertheless, the idea shared within this concept is that human beings are deeply intertwined within their social context, and as a result, must be understood through their relationships with others (Delgado 2019, p. 57). Since norms and practices (including honor codes) are always mediated through social relationships, a relational approach to autonomy understands decision-making abilities as fluid and responsive to the meanings, structures, and dynamics within individuals' relationships and their broader social context (Deveaux 2018).

The emergence of a relational approach stemmed from critiques directed towards a binary conception of autonomy (i.e., agency/coercion) (Deveaux 2018; Veltman and Piper 2014). By adopting an agency/coercion binary, women are positioned as either entirely autonomous or completely constrained—or either "choosers" or "losers" (Hutchings 2013). Specifically, through this binary conception, Muslim women and women of color are often portrayed as victims. Such a view of autonomy is often part of white-centric feminism. As argued by Rafia Zakaria (2021, p. 11), "in the value system of white feminism, it is rebellion, rather than resilience, that is seen as the ultimate feminist virtue . . . The truth that resilience [within coercive conditions] may be just as much a feminist quality is lost in the story of feminism written and populated entirely by white women". In doing so, this view mistakenly links personal autonomy with the rejection of religious or cultural practices, while it "fails to capture the more complex realities of human agency as well as of the way that social practices evolve and are sustained" (Deveaux 2018, p. 88).

So, rather than depending on a binary conception of autonomy, relational autonomy pays attention to the different ways in which women are socially embedded (see, Deveaux 2018; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Such an approach asks about "the degree to which, in any given circumstance or context, women are able to reflect upon, and possibly renegotiate and redefine—or indeed refuse—particular expectations, roles, and activities" (Deveaux 2018, p. 91). This means that women's responses to gender-specific honor codes involve constraints on choices, but also choice within constraints (Narayan 2001, p. 425).

Thus, following the above conception of relational autonomy, this paper investigates (a) how ethnic minority women reflect on honor codes within their specific social context, and (b) how this context shapes their decision-making process when they opt to deviate from feminine honor codes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through life-story story interviews. The life-story interview can be defined as "the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another" (Atkinson 1998, p. 8).

I opted for this method because it allows for insights into women's experiences and choices within the roles and expectations that are associated with gender-specific honor codes. To help elicit their life-stories, participants were posed a series of open-ended, reflective questions that encouraged them to share their narratives based on their subjective identities and perspectives (Atkinson 1998). This was accomplished with the help of an interview guide that included the following themes: parents' birthplace and (former) occupation; migration history; childhood and teenage years; education/career; partner/marriage; and current life choices. These themes were used to guide the interview chronologically. That is, the narrative flow of the interview was guided by starting with inquiries about the participant's childhood and progressively transitioning to the present. In doing so, the life story interviews allowed for insights into women's experiences with, and reflections on, honor settings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Medical Research Ethics Committee (MREC) of the VU Medical Center Amsterdam, the Netherlands (decision date: 29 September 2022). The MREC also assessed that the conducted research is not subject to the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO). For more information on this matter, see the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO 2023). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

3.2. Participant Recruitment and Characteristics

In accordance with the research aim and question of this paper, the research sample consists of Dutch ethnic minority women who deviated from feminine honor codes. They were recruited through a call, which was accompanied with an informative letter, and a phone call, in which potential participants were informed about the research. Women were asked to participate in an interview if they were raised in a family in which gendered honor codes were prevalent and if they deviated from these codes at a certain point in their lives. Here, it is important to note that although all participants confirmed their deviation from honor codes, this does not necessarily imply a rejection of all honor codes prevalent in their families and communities. As highlighted before, women's deviation from and compliance with honor codes is a complex experience that cannot be understood through a binary conception of autonomy. This paper sheds light on the complexities of these experiences.

I recruited and interviewed 14 participants in the Netherlands between October 2022 and May 2023. Five participants were recruited through my personal and professional network, two participants were recruited through social workers, five participants were recruited through private women's support groups on Facebook, and the remaining two participants were recruited through snowball sampling. All interviews were audio recorded with the interviewees' permission and lasted between 90 min and three hours. The interviews were conducted in Dutch, except for one interview, which was conducted in a combination of Dutch and Persian.

All participants are Dutch citizens residing in towns or cities. The majority of the participants study or completed vocational or higher education, with the exception of one participant, whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma. Out of the total participants, seven are married, the rest are either single or in a relationship. Eight participants are currently employed in various occupations, including roles such as social worker, teacher, pharmacy technician, and administrative positions. One participant is unemployed and does voluntary work at a community center. The remaining five participants are university students. Of the fourteen participants, one participant was raised in a Christian household and thirteen participants were raised in a Sunni-Muslim household. Nine participants were born in the Netherlands, four participants migrated to the Netherlands during childhood (together with their parents or through family reunification), and one participant migrated to the Netherlands with her (then) husband. An overview of the research sample is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the research sample.

Name * and Age	Brief Migration History
Ceyda (32)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Turkey
Fazilet (56)	Born in the Netherlands to a parent who migrated from Turkey and a parent who was born in the Netherlands
Fereshta (44)	Afghanistan–Pakistan–Netherlands
Hanan (47)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Morocco
Hayat (24)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Turkey
Maryam (23)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Egypt

Table 1. *Cont.*

Name * and Age	Brief Migration History
Nadia (36)	Iraq–Netherlands
Özge (59)	Turkey–Netherlands
Rozhin (23)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Kurdistan (Iraq)
Saloua (44)	Morocco–Netherlands
Samar (21)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Morocco
Sihame (52)	Morocco–Netherlands
Sumaya (20)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Morocco
Zahra (38)	Born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated from Morocco

* Pseudonym.

3.3. Analysis

All data were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Within the analysis, I employed a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Such an approach implies that existing theory or prior research is used to guide the analysis. This means that the analysis was guided by a relational approach to autonomy. First, I read all transcripts and inductively coded them. Here, repetitive patterns and initial codes were identified. Thereafter, all transcripts were transferred to ATLAS.ti, where they were further analyzed and coded. While continuously comparing the transcripts, I explored the similarities and differences in how women reflect on honor codes and their encounters within an honor setting. Around 90 codes were identified. These were clustered into nine categories (migration history, childhood, emotional/physical violence, virginity/sexuality, making choices, family and community, health, help and counseling–informal, and help and counseling–formal), which were organized in a coding scheme. Saturation led to the identification of three overarching themes, namely: (1) enforcement of gender-specific honor codes, (2) transitions within an honor setting, and (3) navigating the effects of honor violations.

4. Findings

4.1. Theme 1: Enforcement of Gender-Specific Honor Codes

All participants were expected to comply with feminine honor codes through socialization processes within the family and ethnic and/or religious community. While honor codes were often implicitly enforced from a young age, (suspected) deviation from these norms meant that women also experienced explicit enforcement of honor codes. When honor codes were enforced implicitly, this was accomplished through expectations surrounding the role of the honorable daughter/wife. Explicitly, a shared religious and/or ethnic identity was expressed as a means to enforce honor codes. The former was taught through a gendered upbringing that is associated with honor codes, and the latter was enforced when women violated honor codes or when their actions were suspected to lead to honor violations. In the following two sections, I will illustrate the ways in which both gendered mechanisms work and how women reflect upon them within their social context.

4.1.1. The Honorable Daughter/Wife

Participants were brought up with gendered behavior that is in line with the idea of an honorable daughter/wife. Their life stories reveal that an honorable daughter/wife is someone who obeys all three stratified relationships that are inherent to an honor-related context (i.e., male rule, group rule, and elderly rule). During childhood and teenage years, this was promoted through feminine honor codes, such as modest behavior and dress, limited movement outside of the private sphere, and obedience to male and elder authority, while deviations from honor codes were stigmatized. Consequently, participants internalized the behaviors that are associated with the idea of an honorable daughter/wife.

A commonly used term concerning the concept of an honorable daughter/wife is *ayb*, an Arabic word that roughly translates to "shameful" or "disgraceful." Several Turkish-speaking participants expressed this as *ayip*, and a participant with a Moroccan–Arabic background expressed this as *hshouma.* By itself, this term is gender-neutral. However, it is often addressed to girls and women in order to internalize "honorable" gendered behavior and to stigmatize behavior that is considered to be dishonorable. Özge reflects on the use of this term during her childhood years:

> You are groomed to become a housewife. An ideal woman. During that time it feels very normal . . . As a girl you so often hear [that something is considered to be] *ayip* . . . For example [regarding] a girl's sexual honor; even by looking at a man you can violate that honor. I never did such things because I [learned] that very well from my mother . . . You get that kind of message on a regular basis. So, then you simply know how to behave as a girl.

Thus, during childhood and teenage years, feminine honor codes are mediated through the use of *ayb* or similar expressions that teach girls to be an honorable daughter/wife, and thus safeguard the family's good name. All participants expressed that the reasons for such expected behaviors were never explained through dialogue. Rather, through expressions such as *ayb*, participants came to understand from a young age what is deemed to be (dis)honorable behavior. Sumaya gives an example of how such behavior was taught during her childhood:

> When I was 7 or 8 years old, we always had to hold each other's hands while standing in line outside of school. One day [my mom saw me] standing next to a boy. Then she got mad at me when we got home, [she said], "That's not allowed." Even at such an early age she said, "Don't stand next to a boy. Next time you may hold a girl's hand, but not a boy's."

Indeed, ideas about an honorable daughter/wife are not limited to interactions with the opposite sex, but they extend to upholding the family's good name in general. Samar explains this as follows:

> Family reputation was always the number one thing [for my parents]. It was always about how I dressed. The way I put on my headscarf. The way I talked. I'm very blunt, very direct [and] very loud for a girl . . . Not being allowed to travel far without a *mahram* [male relative] . . . Being home early was important, so I couldn't go to sleepovers . . . Because if a woman's alone somewhere late, people will have a certain image of her and [my parents] didn't want people to think that of me.

During their teenage and adolescent years, participants became aware of the expectations surrounding the image of an honorable daughter/wife, as more restrictions were imposed to keep this image intact. Such restrictions were imposed on daughters and not on sons, because the idea of an honorable daughter/wife reflects on the honor of the entire family, as Hayat illustrates in the following:

> The things my sister [and I] would do, would directly affect our family and the shame and how people would perceive us, but when my brother would go out or have a girlfriend of non-Turkish origins, it was very much normalized. But when my father found out that my sister was seen in town with a boy, he beat her up very badly. So therein I constantly saw a double standard.

Family and community norms regarding an honorable daughter/wife led to a fear of gossip among participants. Rozhin explains how gossip within her community regarding women who deviate from honor codes results in social stigma, branding them as "wild and unruly". This compelled her to internalize honor codes and modify her behavior to evade potential gossip about her honor and, consequently, her family's honor:

> You don't want to be perceived as "that wild, unruly woman" . . . In Kurdish there's a saying [about] a wild, unruly woman who has to be sort of tamed because

> she does whatever she wants … As a child, I was subconsciously brought up with stories [i.e., gossip] of women who were perceived as wild and unruly, for example, [because they're] divorced … So, I understood very well what it entails to be a good woman, I knew that very well.

In addition to a fear of gossip, many participants expressed a fear of repercussions of honor violations because they witnessed such repercussions among female family and/or community members. For instance, when Fazilet was fourteen years old, her older sister was exiled to Turkey because she failed to be an honorable daughter and wife:

> [My sister] had just been married for a year, it was an arranged marriage to our cousin … [When] she wanted to divorce, that was not accepted. She violated the family honor with that. And then under the guise of going on vacation [to Turkey], she was taken there with her husband and then [my father] took away her passport and, yes, she never actually got to come back.

Thus, when a women violates honor codes, or when she is suspected of honor violations, she fails to meet the image of an honorable daughter/wife. Repercussions such as the above set an example for other women in the family and community. Through such examples, participants came to internalize expectations about the honorable daughter/wife. Participants also experienced the enforcement of honor codes in a more explicit manner, as will be argued in the next section.

4.1.2. Shared Religious and/or Ethnic Identity

When participants violated honor codes, or when their actions were suspected to lead to honor violations, the consequences varied depending on the type of honor violation. No matter the type of honor violation, an expressed shared religious and/or ethnic identity was frequently used as a tool to enforce compliance to honor codes. This was used by family members and sometimes by community members.

The findings highlight that, within an honor setting, expressions about religious and ethnic identity should not be understood as separate, but as interrelated. That is, religion frequently served as a tool to safeguard the family's reputation when women's actions posed a risk to its honor within the ethnic community. Nadia explains how her parents used norms within Christianity (relating to the stratified relationship of elderly rule) as a means to enforce honor codes and thus safeguard their family's good name within their Iraqi-Christian community:

> They'd cite the Bible, and say: "You're sinning because you're not listening [to your parents]." … That was often used [to impose restrictions]. You know, the 10 commandments, you must obey your father and mother … But [in reality] they're more concerned with what others might say and think. Actually, that has been the main factor in whether or not to allow things: how the rest of the world views their [daughter's] behavior. Then it's like, "You're the mother and you can't even tame her well."

Participants who were raised in a Muslim household expressed the above in a similar manner; in particular, regarding the importance of the stratified relationship of elderly rule within an honor setting.

In addition, when honor codes were enforced, the family's religious and ethnic identity was often used to define a line between "us" (people from the identified religious and ethnic group) and "them" (white Dutch people). Rozhin explains how this was used by her parents:

> They would always say, "Rozhin, we're Muslim, you're different from Dutch people, and that's why we want you to do it this way. You aren't Dutch, you're Kurdish and Muslim." I was constantly reminded of that. They'd also say, "You'll never be Dutch, they'll always treat you like a foreigner." … And [when my father found out about my boyfriend] he kept saying, "You're Muslim, you're

Kurdish . . . The way the Dutch do it—you're 18; go do whatever you want—that doesn't apply to us. You'll always be our daughter."

The emphasis on being an other within a white-majority society may relate to the fact that, as with most ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, all participants came from families who migrated in search of better economic opportunities and/or because of displacement. Within that context, becoming an ethnic minority creates a vulnerable position. Thus, the stratified relationship of group rule was mediated through the use of a shared religious and/or ethnic identity as a way to cope with experienced vulnerabilities and inequalities, as Fazilet explains:

I think that [the way my father raised me] was a defense mechanism. [In the 1960s] he was one of the first immigrants here, and people looked down on him very much . . . He was seen as a nobody. And I think that gave him a kind of defensiveness to stand his ground.

Honor codes through a shared religious and/or ethnic identity were not only enforced by family members, they were also explicitly enforced by community members. This is accomplished, for instance, by keeping watch of whether or not women's behavior outside of the domestic sphere is in line with prevailing honor codes, as Hayat explains:

I was constantly being watched when I was outside . . . To the point where I'm walking in town and a random guy comes up to me and says, "What are you doing here?" I look at him going: "Who are you?" Then he said, "I'm going to notify your brother that I saw you here, just so you know." So I was always just really very aware [that I'm being watched].

Additionally, participants expressed that when their deviations from honor codes became known, this not only damaged their family's reputation, but it often extended to the reputation of their entire ethnic minority community. For instance, after Fereshta divorced her husband, people within her community disdained this choice and ostracized her for it:

Everyone stopped contacting me . . . Many men tell their wives, "Don't hang out with her, she's a bad person, she's divorced" . . . A friend I used to do things together with, go to dinner with, called me and said, "You should be ashamed of yourself; you have put shame on all women. All women, Afghan women, are now ashamed that you got divorced." I said, "This is my life, then I'm no longer Afghan."

This type of emotional violence from family and community members led Fereshta to no longer identify as part of the Afghan community in the Netherlands (hence, "Then I'm no longer Afghan"). Here, it is important to note that such decisions (a divorce, and detachment from the community) do not happen overnight, but take a long process of reflection and negotiation within honor settings, in which violence is constantly present. The following sections illuminate the processes that take place within these transitions.

4.2. Theme 2: Transitions within an Honor Setting

Participants reached the decision to detach themselves from honor codes through continuous reflection on these codes and engagement with their social environment. Through this process, they transitioned from an honor setting in which their actions and life choices were experienced as violent and restrictive to a new context where they experience a form of autonomy that is no longer solely dictated by familial and communal norms. To carry out these transitions, participants either continuously applied strategies to renegotiate honor codes within their social context, or they experienced a turning point that triggered an immediate process towards detachment from honor codes. In the following two sections, I elaborate on both types of transitions.

4.2.1. Strategies to Renegotiate Honor Codes

Four participants (Ceyda, Rozhin, Sumaya, and Samar) found ways to effectively renegotiate some of the honor codes they encountered throughout their lives. This was mediated in different ways. First, these participants could discuss honor codes with either one or both of their parents because, even though their parents were not open to dialogue about the imposed restrictions, these discussions would not lead to severe repercussions. Such deliberation began during their teenage years, when they observed disparities between the restrictions placed on them and the freedom afforded to their brothers and peers. The discussions were, therefore, a direct effect of participants' increasing awareness of the stratified relationship of male rule within their families and communities. Despite facing resistance when renegotiating honor codes, these participants would constantly voice their concerns with their parents, as Ceyda explains:

> My parents never really talked [about the imposed restrictions], but I initiated a conversation myself each time, by letting them know that I disagree with something. I would do this as a teenager and I still do this now. Because of that, they were forced to have a conversation with me. And that has never been easy, but I still do it.

Second, while doing so, participants made sure to earn their parents' trust by taking small steps within their decision-making processes. This allowed them to slowly push the boundaries of the imposed restrictions. Rozhin explains this as follows:

> I took small steps toward what I wanted . . . And I just knew when to accelerate and when to slow down, in terms of what's allowed and what's not. It's kind of like pushing boundaries and then pulling back in time . . . This really eased things for me because I wasn't going all rebellious at once.

Similarly, Sumaya explains one of the strategies she used to obtain more autonomy outside of the domestic sphere, after experiencing loneliness and isolation from her peers:

> I was pushing the limit . . . It's not like all of a sudden I came home at 12:00 a.m., but at the age of 17, for example, I started leaving the house a bit later in the afternoon . . . And whenever I went outside, I'd send my mother a photo, [so she'd know] where I'm at, that we're not doing anything bad. [For example,] I'd send her proof that we're just having some cake.

Thus, constant deliberation and strategies such as the one in the above facilitated the development of a trusting relationship between these participants and their parents. In doing so, they found ways to renegotiate honor codes.

In some cases, these strategies were accompanied with compliance with certain honor codes, which can be understood through the stratified relationships of group rule and elderly rule. For instance, when Ceyda conveyed to her parents her desire to live on her own, she effectively negotiated this demand through a series of compromises that she used as a strategy to earn her parents' trust. However, her success in negotiating her demands also stems from her respect for some of the honor codes cherished by her family and community. This mutual understanding allowed her parents to trust that she would remain an honorable daughter, safeguarding the family's reputation and ensuring that no shame would be brought upon them:

> They certainly trusted me because they knew I would never do anything they would disapprove of. [For example,] I was never into boys and stuff [because] I don't think it's good to have boyfriends . . . And I don't wear a headscarf, for example, but I do wear modest clothes. I would never wear a top or a short skirt . . . So then I said to my father, "You know who I am, nobody [in the community] has ever spoken bad words about me."

Through constant deliberation, combined with her compliance with some honor codes and her respect for the stratified relationships of group and elderly rule, Ceyda managed to

maintain her family and community ties while renegotiating the honor code that restricts unmarried women from living independently.

Contrary to Ceyda, compliance with honor codes was sometimes also used as a gateway to more autonomy—even when participants did not agree with these codes. For example, Samar managed to renegotiate the honor code that restricts unmarried women from living independently because her parents trusted her to be an honorable daughter. Prior to this decision, she was never allowed to stay elsewhere or even travel to another city without a male relative, but this changed when she decided to live and study in another city. For Samar, this renegotiation was used as a means to obtain more autonomy to deviate from other honor codes:

> I thought, "If I live on my own, then I'll have more freedom, then I can decide where I want to go and what I'm going to do." . . . [My parents] gave me permission for this [because] I never got into trouble. I may have had arguments with my mother, but I never went out late . . . I didn't go to parties, so my [my parents] trusted me . . . [Because of that], I can make more choices now. [For example,] that you cannot travel far without a *mahram* [male relative]; I really don't take that into account anymore. I'm also in a relationship . . . [and] I stopped wearing the headscarf.

While Samar's renegotiation of the honor code that restricts unmarried women from living independently allowed her more freedoms, the abovementioned choices that followed this renegotiation are kept a secret from her family, as these choices go against all other honor codes she was raised with and thus also the stratified relationships of group and elderly rule.

4.2.2. A Turning Point within an Honor Setting

As illustrated in the previous section, four participants used several strategies to renegotiate honor codes. However, this was unattainable for the remaining ten participants as there was no space for discussions within their families. This intensified the stakes involved in renegotiating honor codes, making it an immensely high-risk endeavor. As a result, these women detached themselves from an honor setting only after a long period of honor-based violence; after the occurrence of a turning point.

Before a turning point took place, participants did not break with honor codes. The weight of familial and communal pressures to adhere to honor codes resulted in the internalization of these beliefs, which made it difficult to question or challenge them, even though participants experienced these codes as violent. This stemmed directly from participants' internalization of all three stratified relationships. For instance, Fazilet was married off to her cousin at the age of 18, despite her personal desires to the contrary. Nonetheless, she acquiesced to her family's wishes. Her fear of repercussions and the lack of space for discussions within her family led her to internalize her family's honor-related expectations:

> I was really never aware that there was a choice. That you could [say] 'Yes' or 'No' . . . That consideration was never there, because I really thought that [I could only] say 'Yes' to what was asked of me . . . This was because of [my father's] aggressiveness, but also because . . . you need to realize that what's happening isn't right. And I didn't realize that.

Participants' internalized beliefs about honor codes also relate to their social isolation from individuals outside their immediate family and community. Since these participants were isolated from their peers, they lacked exposure to different ideas and experiences that challenge and question honor codes. Consequently, they had limited possibilities to evaluate honor codes and their impact on their lives, which made it difficult to envision a different life than the one that was experienced as violent and restrictive.

Hence, despite their discontent with enforced honor codes, for these participants finding a way out was experienced as seemingly impossible at the time. However, all this

changed when a turning point occurred in their lives. This transition was triggered by participants' interactions with their social environment, and manifested in either one of the following three ways.

First, following a prolonged period of honor-based violence, a more intense episode of emotional and/or physical violence arose, which was perceived as the last straw. As this situation unfolded, participants came to the realization of the need to prioritize their own health and life choices. This will be illustrated through Zahra's story. When Zahra's parents found out that she had a boyfriend at age 17, they decided to protect the family's honor by isolating her at home. This meant that she was not allowed to finish her studies at a vocational school, and that her passport, phone, public transportation card, and house key were taken away from her. After a year, she was allowed to continue her studies. However, when her parents found out she was still in contact with her (then) boyfriend, they deliberately ignored Zahra's presence as a way of punishing her for her honor violation. Feeling increasingly isolated, Zahra made the decision to leave her parental home at age 20, seeking the freedom to make her own life choices:

> I previously expressed no resistance and complied to their measures . . . [But] at some point they just stopped talking to me, while we were living in the same house . . . I said to them, "I can't take it anymore, I'm being silenced and ignored as if I don't exist . . . If I stay here any longer, I don't know what I'm going to do to myself because I just feel so alone . . . I'm really going to lose it mentally." . . . [My father] said: "If you walk out of that door, you're not my daughter anymore." I felt like I had no other choice, so I walked out of the door.

Second, a turning point emerged when participants met a peer who already detached herself from honor-related constraints. This not only offered understanding and acknowledgment of participants' experienced constraints, but more importantly, it also sparked the realization that the desire to make life choices is both normal and attainable. Maryam explains this as follows:

> I never understood why I felt so terrible. . . . I had no real awareness of the difficulties I was facing either. Until I met [a friend with similar experiences]. I always thought I was abnormal and that I was the only one struggling with this . . . but she's going through the same thing and that opened my eyes to think: "It's actually very normal to feel this way." . . . [Since] she had the courage to make certain choices, I thought: "Okay, if she can do it, then it's actually quite normal for me to feel this way about making choices too." And because of her, I was also able to take that step.

Finally, a turning point may arise after the experience of unfamiliar emotions, leading to introspection and heightened awareness of the violence prevalent within the honor-related context. This was the case for Fazilet. After being in an unhappy arranged marriage with her cousin for 17 years, she had romantic feelings for a co-worker. Although Fazilet did not continue with that relationship, it prompted her to reflect on her circumstances. This ultimately set into motion a divorce and a complete detachment from all the honor codes she was raised with:

> The thing that turned everything upside down was that I fell in love with someone for the first time in my life. And that caused something about me to change very much. [I realized] that those 17 years of marriage were hell. . . . When I left [my ex-husband], I suddenly realized, "My father doesn't make choices for me anymore, I make my own choices . . . so, I can also have the will to make different choices." . . . From that moment, I wasn't the same person anymore, I was really someone else. . . . You know, it's like you've been asleep and then you're awake.

In conclusion, a turning point emerged through participants' interactions with their specific social context. After this occurrence, participants' perspectives about making life choices changed entirely. Consequently, these 10 participants detached themselves from most or all of the honor codes they were raised with.

4.3. Theme 3: Navigating the Effects of Honor Violations

Although participants transitioned to a context in which their autonomy is no longer solely dictated by familial and communal norms, this does not mean that they could simply move on with their lives. Indeed, the processes before and after such a transition were accompanied with health concerns caused by lingering guilt, social shame, and anxiety. Rozhin explains how her detachment from honor codes led to feelings of guilt and anxiety, and how the stratified relationships of group and elderly rule still impact her life:

> I was drowning in guilt because I felt like I was doing everything wrong, I was going against all the things [my family] had raised me with . . . It's also still very hard to let go of the fear of what people might think of me . . . I feel like you'd damage your [family's] reputation. So I'm still struggling with who I say what to, who I share things with.

Thus, for many participants, keeping some or all of their life choices a secret is the only way to protect their family's reputation and thus avoid being ostracized, as Samar explains:

> [Sometimes] I'm thinking, "What if I just throw everything on the table?" . . . But I just don't have the nerve to do that, because I'm so very afraid of being ostracized and of losing so many people . . . I'd rather keep [my life] a secret than lose my family.

The above two examples illustrate why participants generally did not share their life choices, including the accompanying difficulties of these choices, with family and community members. Furthermore, participants often chose not to share their experiences due to feelings of shame and a sense of being misunderstood by people who never faced similar situations. While some participants chose to keep certain aspects of their lives a secret, others found it impossible to do so (e.g., because of a divorce or after family members found out about a romantic relationship). Because of this, some participants were indeed ostracized by family and community members. Living a life in secrecy or being ostracized led participants to experience heightened feelings of isolation, loneliness, and at times, depression. As a consequence, several participants grappled with suicidal thoughts, and two participants attempted suicide.

Moreover, many participants who consciously made an effort to maintain their family ties experienced this as difficult due to their differing views on honor codes, as Fazilet explains:

> [Maintaining] contact with my sister is very difficult because she's very much part of that culture where things have to be done in a certain way and I don't conform to that anymore . . . And she's judged when I do something that goes against [family and community] norms. When I do something wrong, for example by having a boyfriend, they tell her, "You have to call your sister to order." So, yes, our contact is very uncomfortable.

Thus, some participants deliberately chose to break off all contact with their family and community members as a way to protect their psychological wellbeing. Hanan highlights this as follows:

> [When my brother] called me, I said, "You know, I'm really done with this . . . Let [our mother] get the birth certificate and cross me out. I have no mother, no father, no one." . . . I hung up the phone, and I really felt a silence and a void.

5. Discussion

In this paper, I investigated the different ways in which Dutch ethnic minority women reflect on feminine honor codes within their social context, and how this context shapes their decision-making process when they opt to deviate from these codes. Rather than analyzing this through a binary conception of autonomy, I followed a relational approach to autonomy in which participants' decision-making processes were understood through

three stratified relationships, namely: male rule, group rule, and elderly rule. Below, I reflect on these findings.

Feminine honor codes were instilled implicitly and explicitly through socialization within participants' families and ethnic/religious communities. Implicit enforcement was achieved through expectations of "an honorable daughter/wife"—a finding that resonates with a study conducted by Christianson et al. (2021). Such expectations were never discussed, but were implicitly taught through a gendered upbringing. The term *ayb* or similar expressions were used to instill ideas about an honorable daughter/wife and discourage dishonorable conduct. Participants adjusted their actions to avoid being labeled as "wild and unruly" and to safeguard their family's honor. Witnessing repercussions for honor violations among female family and community members further internalized the expectations of an honorable daughter/wife.

Explicit enforcement relied on a shared religious and/or ethnic identity to enforce honor codes when violated or suspected of being violated. Here, religious and cultural norms were used as a tool to enforce compliance with honor codes. This was mostly enforced by parents, due to the idea of elderly rule, but also by community members. The findings indicate that enforcing honor codes also involves drawing a line between "us" (people from the identified religious and ethnic minority group) and "them" (white Dutch people). This essentially steers religious and ethnic community members to take on the collective interest of the group over their personal wishes (i.e., group rule). This differentiation may stem from the vulnerabilities and inequalities faced by ethnic minorities in a white-majority society. To cope with these challenges, families and communities frequently foster a sense of unity through group-oriented behavior and the preservation of honor codes that are deeply rooted in their shared religion and/or ethnicity (Buitelaar 2002; Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Merz et al. 2009; van Osch 2017; van Tubergen 2007). Thus, when women deviate from honor codes, they are often stigmatized and socially excluded because their deviant behavior may threaten the survival of the group (van Osch 2017). Moreover, the findings demonstrate that community members may also distance themselves from the honor violator as a means to avoid stigma by association.

All participants risked stigmatization and social exclusion when they detached themselves from some or all honor codes prevalent in their families and communities. The findings illustrate that participants came to such a decision through ongoing self-reflection and interaction with their social environment. Some participants renegotiated honor codes by using strategies to navigate the complex terrain of honor-related settings. This was accomplished through constant dialogue, strategic compliance with some honor codes, and building trusting relationships with their parents. As a result, these participants experienced greater autonomy and the ability to successfully renegotiate some of the honor-related constraints in their lives.

However, for most participants, such renegotiations were not possible. That is why most participants detached themselves from the honor setting after enduring prolonged periods of violence and after experiencing a turning point in their lives. As identified through participants' stories, a turning point occurred in several ways: (1) through the occurrence of a more intense episode of emotional and/or physical violence as the last straw, (2) after encountering peers who already detached themselves from honor-related constraints, or (3) after experiencing unfamiliar emotions that led to introspection and heightened awareness of the violence within the honor-related context. Following these turning points, participants' perspectives on life choices underwent a significant transformation, leading them to detach themselves from most or all of the honor codes they were raised with.

The difference between participants who managed to renegotiate honor codes and participants who detached themselves from honor codes after a turning point, is that the former group had some leeway to voice their concerns with family members while the latter group did not (as this would lead to severe repercussions). These findings reveal that the capacity for autonomy becomes more impaired when there is no room for discussion

because of severely violent circumstances, a point that is supported by other scholars as well (see, van Bergen and Saharso 2015; Mackenzie 2007). That is why four participants were able to envision the necessary steps to detach themselves from honor codes, while the remaining ten participants could envision this only after experiencing a significant turning point.

Both types of transitions led to a shift in perception among all participants. However, this was accompanied with feelings of guilt and social shame. The harmful effects that ethnic minority women experience due to personal shame over being a disappointment to oneself combined with the social shame of losing family honor were also highlighted by Heredia Montesinos et al. (2013).

To safeguard their family's reputation and avoid ostracization, many kept their life choices a secret. Others faced isolation and rejection from family and community members when their deviation from honor codes became known. Even when participants tried to maintain family ties, this was experienced as challenging due to differing views on honor codes and continuous social pressure. This led some participants to cut off all ties with family and community members. These findings illuminate that, when ethnic minority women deviate from honor codes, they are caught in an "oppressive double bind" (Hirji 2021). This double bind creates a situation in which each decision that is made (conforming to honor codes or deviating from some or all honor codes) comes at a benefit and a cost. For some participants, the benefits of making personal life choices carried the painful cost of estrangement from their family and community. In other words, women who choose to deviate from honor codes have a choice, but "their choice has a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' character: whatever an agent does, they seem doomed to bring about a negative outcome for themselves" (Hirji 2021, p. 649). Here, I do not mean to imply that women's constrained choices within an honor-related context are meaningless, but that we should understand the complexity of such choices and how these choices often have a distressing outcome.

While participants expressed feeling more autonomous and emotionally stronger after their detachment from honor codes, all participants reported adverse effects on their mental health (such as anxiety, stress, and depression), stemming from emotions such as shame, guilt, and loneliness. Several participants contemplated suicide, and two participants attempted suicide. Indeed, violation of personal autonomy regarding life choices is associated with suicidality among ethnic minority women in Europe (van Bergen et al. 2012; van Bergen and Saharso 2015; Heredia Montesinos et al. 2013, 2019). Therefore, the findings further highlight the need for attention to women's psychological wellbeing when they experience violence because of imposed feminine honor codes and their detachment from these codes.

6. Conclusions

This study suggests the need to understand women's autonomy within honor-related contexts as stratified and relational. To gain insight into women's decision-making processes within these contexts, it is crucial to shift away from a binary conception of autonomy (agency/coercion or resistance/acceptance) and instead recognize women's autonomy as dynamic, influenced by the intricate web of relationships within their specific context. This implies that we should consider women's positions in their domestic and social domains, as well as their connections to their families and communities.

Simultaneously, this study underscores the necessity for a reevaluation of the prevailing understanding of honor-based violence. Discussions and definitions of honor-based violence tend to focus primarily on direct forms of violence. However, less attention is given to the complex use of violence that is often more subtle and indirect (such as silencing and threats to enforce conformity to honor codes). Thus, in addressing violence against women in honor-related contexts, it is crucial to also include and acknowledge the adverse health consequences resulting from the more intangible aspects of coercive control over women's autonomy. In this paper, I made an attempt to shed light on these pressing concerns.

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